



The 'Right Opportunity'

Gopal Burgher Teams With Fellow Skadden Alums at BurgherGray

In 2006, Gopal Burgher (NY/Structured Finance/'97) left Skadden to join the boutique tax, structured finance and financial markets litigation firm McKee Nelson as counsel. The following year, the Great Recession hit, decimating the structured finance market and spurring McKee's management to reconsider its business plan.

When the firm agreed to be acquired by Bingham McCutchen in 2009, Gopal decided the time was right to "control his own destiny," joining up with an NYU Law School classmate and Skadden alums **Scott Jaffe** (NY/Structured Finance/'93) and **Paul Roberts** (NY/Structured Finance/'96) to found a New York-based firm.

"I had always wanted to do something entrepreneurial, and it had been a matter of waiting for the right opportunity," Gopal says. "When the four of us started talking, it felt like the ideal moment to make this leap."

The new firm, Bryant Burgher Jaffe & Roberts, differed from other small firms in several crucial ways. All four partners had Big Law experience, three with backgrounds in finance. They also diversified the firm's practices quickly, hiring attorneys in such areas as investment management, IP, private equity and real estate. In addition, with three Black founding partners, the firm was certified as minority-owned by the National Minority Supplier Development Council (NY/NJ Council) and the City and State of New York.

Over the years, some founders left and new partners came on board. In 2012, Gopal reconnected with fellow Skadden alum **Leander Gray** (NY/M&A/'97), with whom he had discussed the possibility of working together back in 2009. Along with several lawyers from their respective firms, the two agreed to reorganize into what would eventually become BurgherGray. The firm later became a member of the National Association of Minority and Women Owned Law Firms (NAMWOLF).

"I liken our history to the Skadden story," Gopal says. "Skadden's founders were inspired to do something for themselves and make a big difference, and we felt a similar drive."

The best part of launching the new firm, Gopal says, has been the process of building something essentially from scratch, working hard and watching it grow. He also appreciates being able to provide an alternative for others who don't want, or feel excluded from, Big Law careers. "Our attorneys are bright and extremely capable people who like to do challenging, complex work but in a different environment," Gopal says. "I'm proud of

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Skadden alums Eva Valik, Leander Gray and Gopal Burgher.

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BurgherGray currently has approximately 30 attorneys — including nearly 20 attorneys of color and a third Skadden alum, **Eva Valik** (NY/Capital Markets/’96) — and offices in New York, Washington, D.C. and Chicago. The firm’s key practice areas include finance (such as structured finance, securitization, bank lending and public finance), M&A, litigation, investment management and real estate. BurgherGray’s clients are largely concentrated in financial services, as that’s where many of its senior attorneys got their start, though in recent years the firm has taken on a wide range of corporations and government-sponsored enterprises.

“The work we do normally goes to big firms, so we certainly have had to convince potential clients that it makes sense to trust us,” Gopal

says. “That said, many of us have substantial Big Law experience — for Skadden alums in particular, our credentials go a long way toward earning clients’ confidence. They know that our smaller platform presents a different value proposition but no difference in terms of work quality.”

Over time, as BurgherGray’s reputation has grown and potential clients have learned more about the firm and its work, the pitches have become less about touting the team’s general abilities and more about the substance of particular matters, Gopal says.

The ongoing pandemic has, of course, presented substantial challenges for BurgherGray, Gopal acknowledges. “One key issue has been figuring out how to keep the sense of community that distinguishes us as a firm,” he says. “Since we aren’t seeing each other in person every day, we’ve instituted ‘daily water coolers’ — gatherings on a Zoom-like platform to talk about whatever is going on. It doesn’t have to relate to

our work, because the get-togethers are about being together and addressing each other’s fears and concerns.” The firm has more than weathered the storm, Gopal notes, increasing billing in 2020 over 2019 and managing to avoid laying off any employees.

Gopal continues to see BurgherGray as he did in its early days, as an upstart able to compete with the biggest firms.

“It’s all relative, right?” he says. “Compared to the big firms, we’re still tiny and nimble, though compared to a solo practitioner we’re obviously pretty big. But, when looking at the types of matters we handle and the kinds of firms we’re up against, I still consider us a very small firm that’s punching significantly above our weight.” ■