

Raj De: A Steady Hand in Times of Crisis

By Lisa Jiron

Rajesh “Raj” De is no stranger to working in high-pressure environments. While serving in various roles at the National Security Agency (NSA), the White House, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), and, currently, at Mayer Brown, De has mastered the art of staying composed and clear-headed in the face of the country’s most complex cybersecurity issues.



Dan Oxtoby

As general counsel for the NSA from 2012 to 2015, De was at the forefront of a dynamic time in cybersecurity law. There was tremendous growth in the amount of data being generated, coupled with an exponential increase in hacking. De helped the NSA work through the controversial Edward Snowden leaks, which revealed the agency’s surveillance practices. His level-headed nature also proved to be an

advantage when confidential data from Sony Pictures was leaked in 2014 and the NSA had to assist in tracing and analyzing the malware.

Reflecting on the experience, De says he learned to manage numerous stakeholders, stay calm even when emotions are high, and appreciate multiple perspectives to find solutions.

Today De leads Mayer Brown’s global cybersecurity and data privacy practice following his return to the firm in 2015. During a time when large technology companies are being questioned about their user data collection practices, De is working to find a balanced solution for users and businesses. “The balance [companies] are trying to strike is the convenience that can be afforded with granular use of data versus privacy expectations, which are changing and evolving,” he says. “Striking a balance in a way that works for their customers, in particular, is the greatest challenge.”

De was raised with a sense of public mindedness and understands the value of hard work, so perhaps it is no surprise that he found his way into law. “My father [a doctor] worked harder than anyone I have met. [He] would go to work from 6 in the morning to 11 at night,” he says.

At Harvard Law School, De fostered a curiosity for public interest. “What first attracted me to the law was the idea of trying to make the world a better place in a more general sense . . . by helping people with the law,” he says.

Immediately after earning his JD in 1999, De joined DOJ through its honors program, which paved the way for his appointment as counsel for the 9/11 Commission. There, De left an impression on one of his mentors, former Watergate special prosecutor Richard Ben-Veniste.

“Raj was a standout as he not only had a tremendous work ethic, but he was [also] a quick read. He assimilated the information and was creative in his approach,” Ben-Veniste says. “What really characterizes him beyond his intellect is that he is so unassuming. This quality impressed me and impresses me as a fundamental part of his persona and leadership qualities.”

In 2006 De joined Mayer Brown as an associate, returning to DOJ in 2009 when he was appointed principal deputy assistant attorney general in the Office of Legal Policy. In 2010 De became deputy assistant and deputy staff secretary to

continued on page 42

DE *continued from page 40*

President Barack Obama; he was promoted to White House staff secretary a year later.

De recently served as a volunteer for the Biden–Harris transition team tasked with making recommendations for improvements at DOJ. “It was really rewarding to play a small role in helping our government get back on track,” says De. “[President Biden] was working with so many people who were just so knowledgeable and thoughtful about how to make government work for all of us citizens given what is going on.” De says he is hopeful the new administration will move the discussion forward on racial justice and equity issues.

These days De is focused on the legal profession’s progress in diversity and inclusion. De says this has been at the front of his mind since becoming managing partner at Mayer Brown. He emphasizes the need to be intentional and rigorous in increasing diversity, just as one would with any other business objectives.

De is very conscious of the importance of retention and upward promotion of diverse talent at the firm. “Are we recruiting diverse talent? How are we keeping that talent? How are we promoting that talent? Without pulling all of those levers at the same time, the others will fall flat,” he says. “Being intentional to me is being intentional about every stage of a lawyer’s career.”

Would De consider a return to public service? “The law is a really powerful thing. It is important for anyone to engage with the law in a way that reflects the impact it can have no matter . . . whether you are in government service, at a law firm, [or a] nonprofit,” De says. “The law makes a difference in people’s lives, and never losing sight of that is super important in appreciating the import of what you are doing day to day.”

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TURNER *continued from page 41*

Beyond managing the stress of being a divorced, single working mom, nothing unusual was happening in Turner’s life. In her free time, she volunteered, attended church, and stayed active with her sorority. She lived a clean life and felt at her healthiest. But one day, she had trouble typing, making too many mistakes for her “type A personality” to handle. At work another day, she felt dizzy, off balance, and tired. Hamilton recalls her wanting to lie down and rest.

“She came back 15 minutes later and told me she felt a numbness in her left arm. I immediately thought stroke,” says Hamilton, who recommended she see a neurologist they both knew and trusted from their medical malpractice cases.

Several long hours after an MRI, they both received the news: Turner had a tumor in the right lobe of her brain. At 46, she had Stage 4 glioblastoma brain cancer (GBM), the same type of cancer that claimed the lives of both Senators Ted Kennedy and John McCain. An aggressive form of cancer, the five-year survival rate is between 5 percent and 10 percent.

“Everyone was just so shocked. I had no risk factors, no preexisting conditions, and I’ve got this brain tumor that looked malignant,” she says. “It was like someone let air out of a balloon. I didn’t even have the energy to scream.”

While doctors never gave a firm prognosis, her own research validated that GBM patients often don’t live long. “But they didn’t know the Tiger. I’ve got a God that can change all of that . . . I didn’t have any reason to believe that I wouldn’t be on the survivor end of the bell curve,” she says.

In December 2011, she underwent a successful surgery at Washington Hospital Center, performed by familiar doctors she’d represented. She describes the experience as “wonderful,” keenly aware that her high level of care had everything to do with her connections.

“I don’t know if I would have gotten the same reaction if they didn’t know me. I worry about that for others,” says Turner. “There are people who don’t have a Washington Hospital Center where they are. That’s one of my missions.”

Turner spent the next year in recovery, going through radiation and chemotherapy treatments five days a month for 10 months. Red

velvet cupcakes, prayer, laughter, and support were the things that helped her feel better, she says. Turner has been brain cancer-free since December 2012.

Since that time, she’s poured her energy into advocacy, participating in and becoming a top fundraiser for the National Brain Tumor Society’s annual Race for Hope. She’s shared her personal story in interviews, written letters to policymakers, and worked on race-planning committees. That work continues today.

Her work as a trial attorney stopped when her firm was dissolved in 2013. Turner currently works part-time in-house at Howard University Hospital managing medical malpractice cases, mostly investigating and negotiating claims. It’s different but rewarding, she says. And it has allowed her time to check off one of her bucket list items: write a book.

Inside of her, all those years, was a writer itching to come out. In February 2021, she debuted her first novel, *The Other Twin*, a book she started in 2016 during a blizzard. It tells the tale of college-age twin sisters who fall apart when one twin struggles with her identity.

“I’ve been a writer forever in my mind. I imagine and dream in detail,” says Turner, who was encouraged by a member of her book club to have her story published. “I was content to let it live on my computer.”

But she’s glad she didn’t. In fact, she has two more books in mind. Writing, like practicing law, giving back to her community, and advocating for brain tumor research, is now part of her calling.

Surviving cancer was a message from God to get her focused, Turner says. She would get a second message in July 2020 when a routine mammogram detected breast cancer early. She had surgery in August and, thankfully, she needed no other treatment beyond hormone therapy.

“Through it all, I’ve learned that my faith was stronger than my cancer diagnosis. God uses things like that to bring you closer,” Turner says. “No matter how hard things may seem, I can take on anything. I have that strength in me. The cancer was what showed that to me.”

Stacy Julien is a regular contributor to Washington Lawyer.