

## Insider View: Colette Stanford, Chief Legal Officer at SPARC Group LLC

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- Tell us about your career path from Aeropostale, Inc. to SPARC Group LLC.

When I joined Aeropostale, Inc. (Aeropostale) in February 2007, I would not have imagined that my career would become what it is today. I was the second attorney hired in the legal department, and the team eventually grew to five members with two attorneys, a paralegal and two compliance professionals. In September 2016, however, I was on the brink of losing my job. Aeropostale filed for bankruptcy in May 2016 and I was waiting to see if the company would be liquidated. At that time, I was prepared for whatever was going to happen. I had received great advice that attorneys are still needed even if a company liquidates. Plus, it was easier to look for a new job while I was still working. Fortunately, the company was not liquidated. Close to the deadline, it was announced that the assets of Aeropostale were being sold to Aero OpCo, which eventually became SPARC Group. When the new company officially launched in January 2017, the legal and compliance department consisted of me as the sole attorney, and the manager of product integrity and social compliance. Aside from recovering from the bankruptcy, we had to learn to operate under the new ownership structure. Seven years later, this new company now operates seven brands: Aeropostale, Brooks Brothers, Eddie Bauer, Forever 21, Lucky Brand, Nautica and Reebok. Each acquisition added new business areas and additional people, so my responsibilities grew as the company grew. Today, I manage the legal and compliance team of 29 members including attorneys, paralegals and compliance professionals spread across the seven brands in seven offices.

- How did you transition from working at a law firm to becoming in-house counsel?

I always knew that I wanted to work in-house, which attracted me because I liked the idea of having one client. When I got the opportunity to make the transition, I was so excited to not have to bill time anymore that I did not think of what I would miss. While being in-house was

great, I really missed the partners I worked closely with and my colleagues at the firm. I no longer had the ability to drop by someone's office to discuss legal issues. In addition, being in a "legal" role meant other business teams viewed me as the "law," and I had to work hard to build trust with them. It was challenging to get the internal clients to view me as a partner rather than the legal police. Initially, I missed the camaraderie at my former firm so much that I even thought about going back. Luckily, I got past those initial transition issues, and practicing in-house met my expectations. I love supporting our business teams and helping them work through their issues, even with the fast pace and long hours. Having an open door policy to everyone at the company, treating all questions (whether big or small) with respect and cutting back on my legalese has helped me build great relationships. When I am faced with a challenging issue, I have been fortunate to work with excellent outside counsel such as the attorneys I work with at Katten. I appreciate being able to pick up the phone and speak with Karen Artz Ash, Jessica Kraver, Stacey McKee Knight and Janella Gholian to discuss one of my infamous "quick" questions, or work with Vasiliki (Kiki) Plevritis on trademark clearance issues.

- What are the most rewarding aspects of your current leadership role?

I really enjoy being involved in the business operations of the seven SPARC brands. Gaining visibility into the business operations of each brand allows me to connect the brand legal teams and business teams together, which facilitates better synergies across the brands. Two projects that I am passionate about and that have brought the brands together are SPARC's diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) initiatives and overall ESG initiatives. I am the co-executive sponsor of SPARC's DE&I initiatives alongside the Chief Human Resources Officer. Working with the SPARC DE&I office, SPARC successfully launched a cross-brand mentoring circle among other initiatives. Sustainability falls under the legal and compliance department, and I helped create a sustainability council comprised of a cross-functional, cross-brand working group that brainstorms on sustainable product development and best practices for the brands. I like that these projects positively impact our associates as well as our customers.

- Do you have opportunities to mentor other diverse women in your industry?
- Yes, I try to make myself available as much as I am able. Unfortunately, my calendar is usually jam-packed, but I do try to have an open door policy at work. I also keep in touch with young women that I meet at programs and conferences. For instance, Karen Artz Ash invited me to a program at New York Law School pre-pandemic where I met a rising 3L. She and I have kept in close contact, and I have enjoyed watching her career develop as an Assistant District Attorney.
- How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact the way you work and collaborate?

It surprised me that COVID-19 improved my working relationships. I have always made a point to maintain personable relationships at work. Working at home, however, gave me (and all of us) visibility into the personal lives of my team members and colleagues that may not have happened if it were not for the conditions of the pandemic. With videoconferencing, I got to see them in their own spaces. Instead of just seeing pictures of family and family pets in the office, I got to see and hear them live on camera. This visibility helped me view my team members and colleagues as more complete people and, as a result, helped all of us work better together. From this perspective, we were able to do the difficult work of trying to figure out how to reopen more than 1,000 stores without clear guidance and continue to run our various businesses, including the three that were acquired during the peak of the pandemic. At SPARC, we were already accustomed to collaborating, but the additional challenges of the pandemic proved just how well we work together.

- What are the most important keys to success for the next generation of fashion lawyers?

For any attorney, whether in the fashion industry or otherwise, I think it is important to listen to your client, be responsive and get to know their business. In the fashion industry, we work with creative individuals who have great ideas. If we do our job well as attorneys, we can help them bring those ideas to life as they envisioned them, with very few adjustments. To do so, we must listen to what our clients tell us (and don't tell us) and understand their processes in order to make our recommendations palatable. Most importantly, we have to understand their business and make sure we ask the right questions to meet their needs.

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