

How Earl Adams Jr. Is Leaning on His Political Experience To Guide His Firm Through COVID-19
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By Emily Van Zandt

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In February, [Earl Adams Jr.](#) became one of the youngest attorneys ever promoted to D.C. managing partner for Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr LLP. Just weeks later, he was shutting down the District office and shifting its 32 local attorneys to the new work-from-home reality.

Adams, a former chief of staff to former Maryland Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown, joined Saul Ewing in 2016 and focuses his practice on what he calls the “gap between government and business,” while still doing

some lobbying on the state and local level. With his eye on 2021, Adams hopes to safely bring the office back together — “it’s important for us to have that cohesiveness” — and start ramping up hiring and expansion plans, a major pre-pandemic goal for him.

As a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up? I always knew that I wanted to be involved in government and law. I don’t know if it was growing up inside the Beltway, but I knew the theme song to NPR’s “All Things Considered” probably before “Sesame Street.”

Where are you from originally? I grew up in Ft. Washington, Maryland. I like to say I’m a Prince George’s County boy. My parents have been in the county for close to 50 years now. Other than leaving for roughly 11 years, I’ve lived in Maryland — with a short stint in downtown D.C.

How did politics play a role in your family? We were always having family discussions about local issues. My mother was a 35-year veteran of the D.C. Public Schools system. I remember her taking me to picket lines back in the ’80s when D.C. teachers were out on strike.

What drew you to Morehouse College? I wish I could be more creative, but it was Dr. King. Knowing he came from Morehouse — it impacted what I felt I could accomplish. I felt then and now that the experience at Morehouse would set me up with a network of people that would help me throughout my life, which turned out to be true.

What drew you back to D.C. for your law practice? There’s no other place where you can effectively, perfectly marry law and politics and policy. I didn’t know exactly how it was going to happen. I worked in labor and employment law, but I knew I wanted to get engaged and knew D.C. was the right place.

You took a break from private practice to work in Maryland politics. What was that like? I joined the O’Malley-Brown administration as then-Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown’s deputy chief of staff, and eventually his

chief of staff. I served in that role for five years. The reason I left, to be very honest, is my wife and I had our second child. Five years in a chief of staff role in dog years is about 30 years.

How has it been to lead your office through the pandemic? I was promoted on Feb. 19 and on March 16 I closed the office. It was a crash course in management and leadership. Having been a chief of staff, where I ran an office in state government, I'm comfortable in a management role. But the difference in a law firm environment is that amongst partners, we are all equal. It's an exercise in persuasive authority.

Lawyers are used to long work weeks and a fast pace. What happened when courts closed and that slowed? For a lawyer who has seen various cycles, you develop enough benefit of hindsight to know it will turn around. This was unique. The older lawyers were OK, but I did have several conversations with some younger lawyers to help them understand that it's OK and the firm has a commitment to them. Don't overly stress yourself and take advantage of the time — write an article, put some thought leadership out there. But the past three months, we've been very active.

What's been working to motivate your staff while working remotely? Though a lot of trial and error, I think we settled in a nice groove. At the beginning, we were so concerned about people feeling connected that we were having weekly and sometimes daily calls. It was a big effort. After about a month and a half, it became clear that this wasn't going to be a short term situation and people began to get a little honest to say, "This might be a little too much." I still have regular check-ins, but we just have a monthly coffee break for the entire office. We keep it light. We've had bingo, we've had cooking demonstrations, funny pet pictures. We still have monthly staff meetings and partner meetings that are more official, but these give us a chance to connect.

How has this time of remote work been for your family? We're making it. We are giving ourselves the grace to recognize that it can be frustrating, but we love each other. My wife is the dean of students at the University of the District of Columbia's law school. She has been managing a transition to an entire school going remote. While she's dealing with that, I'm dealing with the office, and we're also raising two wonderful boys.

How do you find time to relax? We do a lot of walking. I'm a cyclist now. We do a lot of rides in the neighborhoods and on trails. In the Hyattsville-College Park area, there are a number of trails that go into D.C. and to Montgomery County. We go during the week, not just on the weekends.

Your family cooks together a lot. What have you been making? We made sushi for the first time. We picked wild mushrooms and learned how to sauté them. My wife's parents are from Haiti, so with her guidance, I've become a master of making black beans and rice. We discovered the wok and are making a lot of Asian dishes. That's been really nice family time. It's been really memorable.

The basics

[Earl Adams Jr.](#)

- **Age:** 44
- **Residence:** Hyattsville
- **Education:** Bachelor's in psychology, Morehouse College; master's in public administration, Harvard University; JD, Boston College
- **Family:** Wife Tamara, children Earl III and Avery
- **First job:** Cutting grass