

## Executive Search...With a Mission

**I**n October 2019, Toya Lawson joined us and opened Bridge Partners' Philadelphia office. In January 2020, Ryan Whitacre launched our Chicago office, giving us a presence in the Midwest and continuing our national expansion. Here, our newest Partners sit down to talk about what drew them to the Firm, the challenges (and opportunities) they see in the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) space, and aspirations for the future.

**Ryan Whitacre:** Since you came aboard a few months before me, why don't you do the honors and kick things off – What's your origin story? Where were you before Bridge Partners?

**Toya Lawson:** I joined Bridge Partners in October 2019. I am originally from Southern New Jersey and completed my college degree at Arcadia University in Glenside, PA. I now live in the Philadelphia suburbs - Wyncote, Pennsylvania to be exact.

I've been married for 18 years to Gavin Lawson and I have two children, Maya and Roman. I am involved in my community as a Mentor with Women of Tomorrow and I am also an active participant in the Forum of Executive Women. I serve on its Diversity and Inclusion Committee. I also serve on the Parent Association Executive Board of my children's school. I bring to Bridge Partners about 20 years of recruitment experience.

How about you?

**RW:** I'm a recovering lawyer turned head-hunter. I was in legal practice for more than a dozen years before moving into executive search, where I've been since 2013. This Leap Day, I celebrated my 12th wedding anniversary with my wife, Kate Donaldson, a concert violinist turned CFP®. (There is a theme in our household.)

We live in the Roscoe Village neighborhood of Chicago along with our rescue pibble Abby. As a couple, we enjoy giving back and support a number of causes, including The Cradle – where I sit on the Board of Directors – as well as the Anti-Cruelty Society, Equal Justice America, the Grant Park Music Festival, Hanul Family Alliance, NPR, and The Field Museum, among other organizations.

Bridge Partners is an executive search firm with unique expertise in attracting and retaining senior, diverse executives



Toya Lawson



Ryan Whitacre

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So many people come to search from other professional paths; I'm curious as to how you got into this business?

**TL:** You're right, no one goes to college and majors in Executive Search and Recruitment. We all fall into it in some way. I fell into it early and loved it from day one. I am happy to say I have built a successful twenty-year career as a search and recruitment professional.

I was first exposed to recruiting while in college, working as a summer INROADS intern at my sponsoring company CIGNA Healthcare. INROADS was and is an international organization whose mission is to develop and place talented minority youth in business and industry and prepare them for corporate and community leadership. CIGNA Healthcare was chosen for me because I was a Health Administration major. My first summer, I worked in Human Resources, within compensation and benefits and sat next to the recruitment team. I could hear the work that they were doing each day. It really resonated with me. As a result, I added Human Resources as my minor and later asked my manager if I could join the recruitment team the next summer. My manager allowed it and they had me attend recruitment and interviewing training. That is how my recruitment career started.

Since then, I've worked in a variety of recruitment environments including staffing agencies, contingent search, internal/corporate HR, consulting and most recently retained executive search. I have recruited all levels of professionals for my clients, from administrative assistants all the way up to CEOs. Retained search at the executive level has been my favorite experience thus far and where I plan to spend the rest of my career.

And you, how did you come to search after a career as a lawyer?

**RW:** I credit two people, in particular. First, by a mile, is Kate. Her bravery in turning from a life of music performance to the world of personal finance, where she ultimately became an owner of a 50-year-old financial planning firm, set a hell of an example.

Second is my friend Mike Sachs, who first approached me about becoming a recruiter while I was working as in-house counsel for a large company. At that point, I had been a candidate in several searches and I'd been a hiring manager utilizing outside search firms, so had an idea of what recruiting entailed. I did not think it entailed me. Mike had made the move several years prior from lawyer to recruiter and he's good at his job; he saw something in me that I did not and it prompted the gears to turn.

I made the jump in the end because I anticipated that recruiting could be a natural – if unintended – vocation that maximized many of my personal interests and better qualities with my dedication to delivering client service at the highest level. I'm with you – now I'm here, I intend to stay for the duration. What I most like is that every day is something different or new, because our business is people. And people are endlessly fascinating, which means there's no opportunity to be bored in this job.

What do you most like about this career?

**TL:** Working as an executive search consultant has been a wonderful experience for me. Executive search is a people business. I became a Recruiter because I liked helping people, both clients and candidates. One of the biggest life decisions each of us makes outside of where to go to college, who to marry, and where to live, is where to work. I get to be at the center of that decision-making process. On behalf of my clients, I present amazing career opportunities and possibilities to candidates. I serve as a guide and sounding board for each side. I get to influence, listen, and offer my advice. When I complete a search, I feel an organization is forever better, and candidate's life is forever changed. Seeing someone I placed get promoted or seeing the company grow to the next level is icing on the cake for me.

The relational component of executive search is also great. I speak to and meet new people every day, and I build connections. I get to understand how both sides make decisions and what is important to them. I listen to them and give them an opportunity to be heard.

Because of this, I have established long-term relationships through the years with both clients and candidates. Some of the best and most fulfilling relationships come from the candidates and clients I do not place or do not engage me as their search consultant. To them I am a career coach, advisor and consultant.

Interestingly, I learned last year after taking a personality evaluation that I am motivated by achievement. The executive search process feeds that for me. As a former college and high school athlete, I like to win. Every time I take on a new project or search, it is like starting a new game of find the needle in the haystack. When I find the needle or “purple squirrel” in some cases, I feel like I win, and my client and candidate win as well. It is a win-win-win. Nothing beats that feeling for me. Lastly, the money is great. I like a pay for performance type role.

**RW:** I don’t know if you get asked this, but people ask me why I came to Bridge Partners and that’s easy: It’s the mission and the opportunity to further that mission.

This Firm has delivered a solution to diversity at the executive and Board levels for 17 years — Tory and Larry have been at this well before “D&I” existed as a catchphrase, much less a concerted endeavor. As others have said, don’t just listen to what people say, watch what they do. Bridge Partners is unapologetic in its commitment to seeking out diverse talent for senior posts and has the track record of delivering on that commitment.

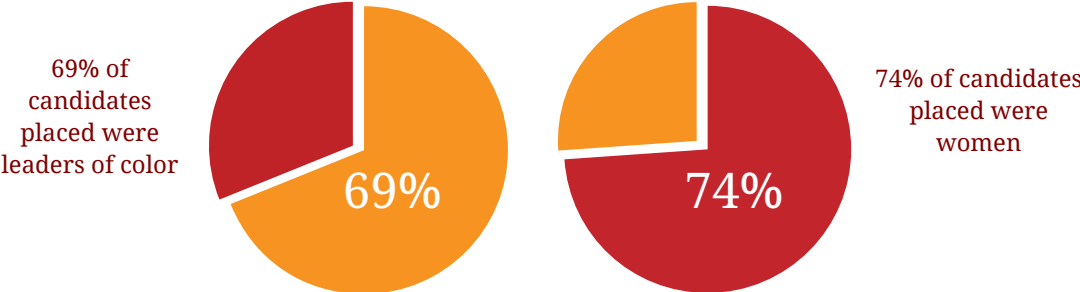
That was attractive to me as it is a direct response to something I’d heard in my experience within corporate America sitting on numerous diversity initiatives, committees, and task forces where a regular refrain was a version of: “Sure we’d like more diversity, but we really want the most-qualified person.” I find a host of issues with this statement (and the sentiments behind it), but the riposte offered by Bridge Partners is: Diverse talent is out there. This Firm has found such talent for almost two decades – amply demonstrated by the fact that 75% of placements are diverse – and it feels great to be someone tapped to carry on that success story.

How about you? What drew you to the Firm?

**TL:** The same – the mission drew me. I had never heard of a search firm with a mission. The mission at Bridge Partners is to diversify the c-suite with every placement we make and to complete executive searches in an equitable and inclusive manner. That got me excited and resonated with what I believe is my passion and purpose.

Last year, I completed Leadership Philadelphia’s Core Program. Leadership Philadelphia a executive leadership program that connects the talent of the private sector to serve the Philadelphia community. During the ten-month program, many great topics were discussed including understanding your leadership style, teamwork, building relationships, connecting with others and preparing for board service. There were also several themes discussed surrounding connecting with your purpose, understanding why you do what you do and leaving behind a legacy.

### OUR 2019 SEARCH STATISTICS



These discussions caused me to start to really think deeply about the work I was doing as a search professional. What I came to realize later was that working at Bridge Partners would allow me to bring together my passion for recruitment and my purpose, which I believe is to serve and help others. It was also going to give me the ability to make a difference in the lives of people who look like me. Bridge Partners 2019 search statistics blew me away, 69% of the candidates placed were leaders of color and 74% were women. As a woman and a person of color, seeing people who look like me get the opportunity to be considered for c-suite and VP level positions in organizations that desire to have them makes my work meaningful.

**RW:** You were recruited to Bridge, right?

**TL:** That's right. I received a LinkedIn message from a search professional representing Bridge Partners. Basically, I was recruited in the same manner in which I recruit candidates for my clients. I have spent a career telling candidates to talk to the Recruiters when they reach out because they could be presenting an opportunity of a lifetime. For the first time in my career, I actually took my own advice.

Weren't you recommended by our Partner Debbie Tang?

**RW:** Thankfully, yes! Debbie and I are friends and were colleagues in a prior search firm, and I'm thrilled to be partnering – literally – with her once more. At the time, I was considering a couple other opportunities but what was decisive in favor of Bridge was the chance to make a real difference not just in peoples' lives, but within the highest ranks at institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, companies like Estee Lauder or my hometown Flint, Michigan's own Mott Foundation — all Bridge Partners clients, by the way.

Without knowing what's in someone else's head or heart, I can't comment on their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). What I can say, is that the commitment is real at Bridge Partners. It's without pretense or artificiality, and it's reflected in the make-up of the partnership itself — you, me, Debbie, Larry, Janet, and Tory. DEI is in the Firm's

DNA. It's what sets us apart both in terms of each client engagement and in our own hiring practices.

What factored into your decision-making process when deciding whether to join?

**TL:** At that time, I was not considering any other opportunity before Bridge approached me. Over the previous twelve months, with the market being so strong, I had received several calls and LinkedIn messages from other contingent and retained search firms about positions, but I always ignored them. I knew I did not want to work in a contingent environment again and most of the retained firms that called me were larger firms. Large firm business models are different than what Bridge was offering. Bridge's business model is two partners to every search and Partners are involved in research, execution and business development. That is how I prefer to work. I like to be involved in every aspect of the search so when a client asks a question, I truly have an answer. There is no hand-off.

Prior to Bridge, I was with a regional firm that focused exclusively on the recruitment and placement of accounting and finance senior executives. I spent 17 years focused on finding CFOs and Controllers for my Philadelphia based clients. Occasionally, my previous firm received assignments for CEO, CIO, CHRO or other searches outside of our niche. When that happened, I always volunteered to take the assignment. I loved taking on new challenges and learning a new function.

I was craving variety and that is what I have found at Bridge. No two searches are the same and our focus is national. So far, I have participated in searches for a VP of Fundraising for a community college, an Assistant General Counsel of a healthcare organization, a Corporate Controller for an international nonprofit and a nonprofit CFO search. Only in a small, boutique executive search firm is that type of variety possible.

**RW:** You anticipated my next question: What have you found so far?

**TL:** Working at Bridge Partners has been a wonderful experience. Along with the variety, the work is challenging and fun. Our internal team is diverse and each one of us is committed and motivated by our mission. I personally love that about us.

What about you, how's it been in the first two months?

**RW:** As we like to say in the business, it's a fit. For the better part of 20 years I've been a part of large (and very large) organizations and have come to realize such platforms aren't necessarily the best environments for me. I welcome the agility and flexibility offered by a boutique shop where we have history and resources, but not superstructure. And I too love our own diverse set of perspectives.

On that note, do you think the background of the recruiter has an impact on the DEI mission? Put another way, do you think diverse recruiters are a factor in making diverse placements?

**TL:** Yes, I do. Other search firms are not delivering diverse candidates because in many cases, they themselves are not diverse nor have they embedded diversity and inclusion into their own cultures. While going through the hiring process with Bridge Partners, I started to look at other search firms. What I noticed is how non-diverse they were. It is very difficult to deliver on something that you yourself do not value or perceive as important.

Also, I believe sometimes it takes diversity to recruit diversity. After 20 years in recruitment, I know the conversations I have with diverse candidates are different than other recruiters. Because I check the diversity box in two places, women and people of color talk to me and openly share their concerns about working in a particular environment. What I respect about Bridge Partners is we value diversity and our team is as diverse as we would like our clients to be. Larry and Tory are intentional about who they have added to the team. I remember one of the first questions they asked me during my interview was my feelings regarding diversity and inclusion when it came to search. They wanted to make sure I was as passionate and committed as they were. I appreciated that.

**RW:** Completely agree. Representation matters. The gatekeepers matter.

So now we've been here for a minute or two, any goal or aspiration you'd like to accomplish in particular?

**TL:** Because we see so many organizations now wanting to add or increase the diversity to their Board of Directors, I would like to see Bridge Partners take on Board searches at for-profit organizations in greater number. We are well-networked to high performing diverse individuals who would love the opportunity to serve on for-profit boards and can deliver the talent sought by such organizations.

**RW:** Can't disagree with that either. Personally, I'm too much of a realist to be surprised that Bridge Partners has been in business – successfully – for 17 years and continues to grow. We have something that works and that formula increasingly speaks to more and more Nom/Gov chairs, hiring committees, and decision-makers.

I'm excited to be a part of our Firm's push into a new decade and am particularly interested in bringing the Bridge Partners' story to the industrial heartland and to small- and mid-cap companies where DEI may be a new topic or may seem daunting. I want to try to de-mystify any apprehension and to be a resource for leaders seeking an edge on the competition. My message is simple: DEI is critical for businesses, be they for- or non-profit, if only to prevent staleness, group-think or inertia. A diverse set of minds, perspectives, and backgrounds promotes creativity, innovation, and positive momentum. While a diverse leadership team or Board may seem aspirational to some, I want to show that it's quite achievable. The talent you seek is out there, but it takes courage, conviction, and an openness to change. And we can help with that. ■

# SELECT CLIENTS

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Campbell's  
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Freddie Mac  
General Electric Company  
GNC Corporation  
Grant Thornton International  
JBG Smith  
Kaiser Permanente  
Macys  
McKesson  
Northwestern Mutual  
Novartis Pharmaceuticals  
Prudential Financial  
Sodexo  
Sound Transit  
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“ A 100% search completion rate since our founding in 2003, and a commitment to presenting an inclusive shortlist for each and every search, is testament to our dedication to quality of search execution. ”

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Congressional Hunger Center  
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Denver Foundation  
Emerson College  
FairVote  
Federal Home Loan Bank  
Gallaudet University  
Global Fund for Children  
Habitat for Humanity  
Jackie Robinson Foundation  
Metropolitan Museum  
National Alliance for Mental Illness  
National Association of Attorney Generals  
Newark Museum  
Population Services International  
Project Concern International  
San Francisco Symphony  
Simons Foundation  
TechnoServe  
TIAA-CREF  
UMassMemorial  
Vermont Foodbank  
Wikimedia Foundation  
Women In Need (Win)  
YMCA  
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