Women take the lead in law
DENVER FIRMS ORGANIZE GROUPS THAT HELP FEMALES TO ADVANCE

BY DOUG MCPHERSON
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wcdough@gmail.com

When Ali Metz’s maternity leave ended and she returned to her law firm, Kirkland & Ellis LLP in New York City, she learned that the one woman in a leadership position in her department was leaving.

“That’s when it hit me that I really needed to know other women who were fighting the same fight I was fighting—women who could be an advocate and mentor,” Metz said. “It really helped to have a support network and someone I could look to and talk to about what my career would look like in a few years.”

It was a thought that stuck with Metz until she moved to Denver three years ago and began working as an associate at Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck LLP, one of the city’s biggest law firms.

Metz said she was immediately impressed with the number of “wonderfully talented” women at the firm and began thinking about how to formalize mentorship there.

She eventually came up with the Women’s Leadership Initiative (WLI), a professional development program for female attorneys in the firm.

To get it off the ground, it didn’t hurt that one of the firm’s co-managing partners was a woman, Ellen Schulhoffer, at the firm’s Las Vegas office.

“I wrote down what I thought WLI might look like as a program at the firm and shared it with Ellen and she seized the opportunity; she was a big proponent to get it through the executive committee,” said Metz, who specializes in mergers and acquisitions.

The program officially started in May 2014 and Metz now serves as its co-chair.

Metz said the main focus for the first year has been to “establish broader connections with women throughout the firm.”

She said the firm is holding regional meetings so women from smaller offices that don’t have as many women can attend and take part in WLI.

The firm also conducts teleconferences for some WLI meetings.

WLI meets every other month and includes “mentoring circles” of seven to 10 women from different departments and practices who discuss topics related to women in law.

Among the first subjects WLI covered was practical tips on balancing personal and professional lives.

“We had a speaker who was a leader in law who gave us time-management tips like just waking up an hour earlier to get things done,” Metz said.

“We also discussed confidence and how to display it, how to speak confidently. We found women are responding best to this kind of practical advice.”

Nicole Ament, a shareholder at Brownstein who works in real estate, is co-chairing WLI with Metz.

“It [WLI] has given me the opportunity to meet assiduously with different departments and offices,” Ament said.

“And as the co-leader of WLI, I spend time touching base with women from different areas to understand what concerns them and what support everyone needs. It definitely strengthened my network within the firm.”

Ament said she attended a conference recently on women in law in San Francisco, where she heard from other women about a need to formalize leadership opportunities in firms and encourage women to apply for such positions.

“I think women can be hesitant to apply for leadership positions,” Ament said. “Applying isn’t a self-motivated thing and people are often encouraged by someone else at the firm. Women don’t think to put themselves in those positions. They need to be encouraged to do that and to also understand they’ll have support of both male and female colleagues.”

Ament said that while there’s been progress in the number of women at law firms and that some firms have reached 50-50 ratios of men and women, Colorado still has room for improvement.

“I think at Brownstein we’re ahead of the curve, and Colorado is definitely on the right track and some firms are starting programs like WLI,” she said.

Miko Brown — a partner with Wheeler Trigg O’Donnell LLP, another large Denver-based firm — said her firm created the Women in Leadership Lecture Series (WILLS) in 2013 “to start a conversation among lawyers — women and men — our clients, and the larger legal community.”

She described WILLS as a forum for discussing solutions for challenges women lawyers face and a way of fostering and promoting female leadership.

“The challenges include biases and perceptions — often unconscious — that act as obstacles to women’s promotion and success,” Brown said.

“The resulting dialogue has exceeded our expectations and it has directly led to greater sponsorship of women attorneys, stronger relationships with in-house counsel and colleagues in the community, and, as a bonus, several rewarding new litigation matters.”

Brown said the issue that troubles her most is the lack of female role models. “There’s something to the phrase ‘You can’t be it if you don’t see it.’ WILLS is addressing this issue by bringing together strong and successful women who’ve followed many different paths to the top. These women are inspirational and provide invaluable support to each other and the new generation of female lawyers.”

Alison Zinn, president of the Colorado Women’s Bar Association, said she believes programs like WILLS and WILLS “are essential” to helping firms identify issues related to gender.

“They also provide a forum for women to discuss concerns in a supportive environment,” Zinn said.

“These groups create a positive space for female colleagues of different levels to form mentoring and sponsorship-type relationships in the most organic way. Relationships with decision-makers, both men and women, are critical to the pursuit of a more diverse management team in any organization.”

Zinn added she believes one of the most critical issues for Colorado women in law is pay equity. She said in the legal field, full-time female practicing lawyers are paid only 79 cents to every dollar their male counterparts receive.

“Colorado is behind the national average when it comes to this topic,” Zinn said. “I’ve discovered that one of the best ways to improve in this area is to educate decision-makers — be it managing partners or legislators — on the most basic statistics. People need to understand the background behind pay equity studies to fully appreciate the statistics.”