

Mid-Law's Female Firm Leaders Reflect On Making History

By Emma Cueto

Law360 (March 15, 2022, 10:21 AM EDT) -- Recent years have seen a wave of women making history at their firms, becoming the first woman to rise to firm head or other senior leadership positions. This Women's History Month, Law360 Pulse spoke to female leaders of four Mid-Law firms about how the legal world has progressed and what the industry's next milestones will be.

While women still make up a minority of firm partners and firm leadership nationally, at least a dozen Mid-Law firms have chosen a woman for managing partner or similar roles since the start of 2021. Several of these women told Law360 Pulse that they were proud to make firm history and continue to push the needle on gender parity, even as they wished their appointments didn't have to be considered historic.

"My first thought was ... that I wish it wasn't newsworthy," said Kristina Lawson, managing partner at Hanson Bridgett LLP, who took over as the first woman in that role in January 2021. "But I also want to acknowledge that it is a special privilege to be the first female managing partner at a firm. ... Reflecting on it, the first firm I've been part of that's been led by a woman is this one."

A History of Progress

From the perspective of women who have broken barriers in the industry, the legal world has gotten better for female attorneys in recent decades.

"The year I graduated law school was the first year that my alma mater had more than 50% women entering the class," said Patricia Costello, who became the first female managing member of Chiesa Shahinian & Giantomasi PC in January. "I remember thinking, 'The battle is over — this is great!'"

"And the battle wasn't exactly over. But I do think things are better today than they were 30 years ago."

"We're being more intentional about it, and more creative in our hiring," said Rhonda Tobin, who became the first female managing partner at Robinson & Cole LLP in February 2021. "And [there's been] a lot of change in how we talk about these things. ... We used to shy away from these discussions, and now we're very intentional and making sure we're having those discussions."



Kristina Lawson



Patricia K. Costello



Rhonda Tobin



Dana Armagno

Lawson recalled that when she was preparing for on-campus interviews in law school, she was advised to take off her wedding ring.

"I [was told] that it might not be acceptable if I was interviewing with BigLaw, which I was at the time, to be married, because that might mean that I might want a family, and might not be able to devote the hours," she said.

Today, she said, she can't imagine that same advice being delivered in such a blasé fashion, but she also pointed out that women can still be held back by assumptions like this.

The women who spoke to Law360 Pulse all said they benefited from a firm or other early workplace that was ahead of the curve on gender equality.

"When I looked around the firm, as an associate and a young shareholder and then when I moved into management, there were always leaders who were women," said Dana Armagno, who in early 2021 became operating shareholder at Vedder Price PC, where she has spent her whole career.

"Growing up here, I've always seen women in leadership roles," she said. "There was always someone to emulate or talk to."

Costello said that during her 25 years as a New Jersey state court judge based in Newark and Jersey City, she was often surprised to find herself at statewide conferences as one of perhaps 20 women in a room with 400 men. Her own county was much better when it came to having women on the bench, she said.

That was also true of Chiesa Shahinian, she said, where more than half of practice group leaders are women and women also make up about half of the C-suite roles.

Lawson said she moved to Hanson Bridgett in 2017 in part because of the firm's vocal support of women in the industry, and she quickly learned the firm was able to walk the talk. Even as a newcomer, she was given opportunities to take on leadership roles, eventually leading to her becoming managing partner.

Making History

For the attorneys who spoke to Law360 Pulse, the impact of becoming the first woman at the firm to hold the top title sort of snuck up on them.

"Honestly, initially, I didn't even think about it until I thought about it," Armagno said.

She had been in leadership positions since becoming the firm's general counsel in 2014, she said, and had figured in the firm's succession planning for years. It wasn't until after the decision was made that the firm realized she would be the first woman in the role. "In some ways it was a non-event," she said, "and in some ways it was huge."

Costello, similarly, knew she was a well-qualified candidate for managing member at Chiesa Shahinian after her years of management roles on the bench, including 10 years as the assignment judge in Essex County, overseeing a court system of 1,000 employees and a \$55 million budget. The decision wasn't a surprise, she said, but she also recognized that having a woman in the role did matter.

Tobin said she was "of two minds" about the barrier-breaking aspect of her election, which likewise came after a long history of leadership roles at the firm, going back to her days as an associate. Her initial reaction was that she'd much rather she weren't the first and that her gender weren't as noteworthy as it was; it wasn't until she started getting messages that she saw it as something more meaningful.

"I knew it was significant and the firm was really excited about it, but the thing that changed my thinking on it was the outpouring of messages I got from our more junior women at the firm, saying what it meant to them," she said, the volume of it caught her by surprise.

"If you can see someone on that path, then you know you can do it. I got just so many messages from junior women saying what it meant to them," she said.

Lawson was also surprised by the volume of messages, from both attorneys and staff at the firm. And it also made her appreciate all the women who paved the way for her, she said.

"I would be remiss if I didn't recognize that I really do stand on the shoulders of so many women in the profession who paved the way," she said. "The first female equity partner at Hanson Bridgett is still an equity partner here today, and she and so many others made it possible for something like this to happen."

The History of the Future

Even as women start breaking into leadership roles as never before, more milestones remain for the legal industry. For one thing, all the women who spoke to Law360 Pulse noted, it would be truly historic when women make up equal numbers of firm leaders.

According to the American Bar Association, as of 2021, 77% of leadership positions in law firms are held by men, and 70% specifically by white men, when 37% of attorneys are women.

As gratifying as it is to see individual women succeed, it is also important to focus on more widespread parity, the women said.

"There's a lot of impediments to getting women [in law firms] to the point where they're reflective of the general population, and a lot of those impediments start much, much earlier than when we look to hire someone," Costello said.

She said that she's optimistic about things like pipeline programs that get college, high school or even middle and elementary school students interested in the idea of law, such as the annual mock trial tournament in New York State.

Armagno said she hopes the more flexible work arrangements that have grown during the COVID-19 pandemic will also benefit women.

And it's also important for firms to focus on more than gender, the women said.

"It's not, of course, just about women in leadership," Lawson said. "Most women in leadership are, like I

am, white women. Law firms have a lot of work to do with attorneys from historically underrepresented groups, especially people from more than one historically underrepresented group."

Seeing women of color achieve similar success will also be an important milestone for women in law, she said, and the same holds true for female attorneys who are LGBTQ or have disabilities.

To get to that place, Tobin said firms should focus less on trying to assimilate attorneys from underrepresented groups into their own culture and focus more on making that culture a place that underrepresented attorneys want to be part of.

"One practical thing, when we're talking about initiatives and programs, is who's making those decisions?" she said. "Are we seeking out women's views on it? Are we seeking out diverse attorneys' views on it? Or are leaders just making decisions about what's best for everyone?"

Progress, the women agreed, is slow but is happening.

"There's so much more work to do," Lawson said, "but we're making great strides towards gender equity in the profession."

--Editing by Marygrace Anderson and Brian Baresch.