

NOT FOR REPRINT

 [Click to Print](#) or Select '**Print**' in your browser menu to print this document.

Page printed from:

Diversity Scorecard 2014: Women Closing The Gender Gap

Julie Kay, Daily Business Review

January 31, 2014

Ellesquire, a group of primarily Hispanic female attorneys in South Florida, meets for breakfast or dinner once a month to network and share business development ideas.

Five established female lawyers and U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Laurel Isicoff in Miami have picked six up-and-coming female business and bankruptcy lawyers to mentor at a monthly lunch group they informally call their "Lean In" group.

[Click here for the 2014 Diversity Scorecard](#)

Citibank recently hosted a networking cocktail reception for female lawyers attended by 15 to 20 prominent attorneys including Effie Silva, a new partner at McDermott Will & Emery; Lea Souza-Rasile, former Miami managing partner of Shook Hardy & Bacon; and Alison Miller of Stearns Weaver Miller Alhadeff & Sitterson.

Two former White & Case female lawyers last year formed a professional group called Dos Equis in honor of women's double X chromosome.

Throughout South Florida, female lawyers are starting networking and mentoring groups and finding ways to help other women get business, secure appointments to judicial nominating commissions and Florida Bar committees, and raise their profiles.

Their goal is to close the widening gender gap and move women ahead in the legal industry.

While women are the majority in law school classes, they are far from reaching gender parity at the partnership level, and female managing partners are a rarity at law firms. Five of the biggest law firms in the AmLaw 200 failed to promote any women to partner this year.

In South Florida, the gender disparity in the legal field was highlighted with the first female partner being named by White & Case in the 25-year history of the firm's Miami office.

"It's all about women helping women," said Mercedes Sellek of Maspons Sellek Jacobs in Coral Gables, who co-founded Ellesquire two years ago. "We've known all along that we've

needed to lean in, but we've been hesitant to do it. I think when you are part of a greater group you empower women."

Mentoring Women

Sellek, who co-chaired the Status of Latinas in the Legal Profession study for the Hispanic National Bar Association, launched Ellesquire two years ago with Niza Motola, special counsel at Littler Mendelson. The group now has 80 members, including an accountant, law professors and public interest attorneys.

One member is Effie Silva, who said Ellesquire has helped her "in terms of finding people I can refer my cases to as well as people interested in hiring me.

"The idea is to refer within the network and not to male counterparts that do the same job," she said. "It's absolutely helped me."

About six months ago, a group of women attorneys decided to mentor six hand-picked, up-and-coming female lawyers in the area of business litigation and bankruptcy. They were concerned about the low level of women in bankruptcy law and receiverships.

The mentors are Leyza Blanco, a partner at GrayRobinson; Cori Castro-Lopez, a partner at Kozyak Tropin Throckmorton; Mindy Mora, a partner at Bilzin Sumberg Baena Price & Axelrod; Patricia Redmond, a partner at Stearns Weaver Miller Weissler Alhadeff & Sitterson; bankruptcy trustee Jackie Calderin and Isicoff.

"We made a list of women looking for networking opportunities and narrowed it down to six," Blanco said. "We meet at power lunch places. People have noticed the 12 of us together."

One of the mentees is Linda Leali, who started her own law firm last year after working as an associate at White & Case for 12 years without being promoted to partner.

Since then, Leali has worked to secure receiverships, successfully obtaining several. However, she and others—including bankruptcy judges—are concerned about a lack of women named receivers and Chapter 11 trustees and leading large bankruptcy cases.

"I think as more women become better known in the community, primarily in the real estate area, we will see more women being appointed Chapter 11 trustees," Isicoff said. "What is more concerning is we are not seeing women first-chairing bankruptcy cases. That is a big concern."

Receivership Diversity

The bankruptcy/UCC receivership subcommittee of The Florida Bar is hosting a receivership education program May 2 in Miami designed in part to increase the participation of women and minorities as receivers. A cocktail mixer will be held that night to give would-be receivers some face time with judges and those assigning cases.

"We are trying to make efforts to diversify the receivership community," said Tom Messana, co-chair of the receivership subcommittee of the business law section of The Florida Bar.

"There's been a concern that was raised to us by the bench that there aren't enough women and minorities receiving receiverships. The community we're talking about ... should reflect the larger community we live in. There's still a glass ceiling out there."

Last year, Aracely Alicia and Peyton White Lumpkin, former associates at White & Case, formed the Dos Equis group. The group's purpose was not socializing or networking, but to give a cross-generational group of female lawyers the opportunity to share information about the business of law. Now, about 24 women from law firms like Bilzin Sumberg and Katz Barron are members.

"We can ask questions you're afraid to voice at your law firm," said Alicia, who just made partner at Alvarez Arrieta & Diaz-Silveira in Miami. "I call them black box topics, which are not so openly shared. We didn't exclude men for negative reasons. It's just that we wanted a space where we feel more comfortable with our peers."

Deliberate Choices

The Miami chapter of the Florida Association for Women Lawyers also is doing its part to promote women. The group recently created a position to monitor leadership openings and notify FAWL's 400 members when there are openings for judicial seats, a Florida Bar board post or judicial nominating commissions.

"We are working hard to lean in and help women," said Sherrill Colombo, president of the Miami chapter of FAWL. "We really get behind our members to let them know there are opportunities out there."

Female general counsel are making an effort to position their business with female outside counsel. At a recent female general counsel seminar held at Greenberg Traurig in Miami, that issue was discussed by Angela Camacho, associate general counsel of Microsoft Latin America; Adrienne Cornejo, vice president of legal affairs for Phoenix Group LLC; and Catherine Smith, senior vice president and general counsel for Brightstar Corp.

When she asks for a law firm recommendation, Cornejo said she gets a man's name nine out of 10 times. So she personally scours law firm websites for female partners. If there isn't one in the practice area she's looking for, she will contact a female senior associate.

"The reason I do that very deliberately is because if there's a chance that a woman will get credit for the business, then I've helped her build her book of business," Cornejo said. "That's the only way that the needle is going to move because women will not become partners until they have a book of business, and they will not have a book of business until we hire them."

Cornejo said she feels a moral obligation to hire women.

"For more than 10 years, 50 percent of the people graduating from law schools are women, so the question is why are there still only 16 percent female equity partners," she said. "There's obviously a problem there, and I think we need to be part of the solution as women, and I think we have a moral obligation to our female peers to do what we can to make those numbers grow."

Building On Friendship

Brightstar's Smith started giving her business to Greenberg Traurig shareholder Patricia Menendez-Cambo after they met at a social event and bonded talking about their children.

"We got to know each other socially where we talk about our children, we talk about travel, we talk about do you have someone who helps your son because mine does the homework and doesn't turn it in," Smith said. "So now I call Patty when I have work and she disseminates it within the firm."

Menendez-Cambo said she is doing the female equivalent of what men have been doing for years to build relationships. While men invite their clients or general counsel to play golf or to a basketball game, Menendez-Cambo will invite Smith to a spa day.

"We'll text each other, 'Saturday, spa?' " Menendez-Cambo said. "We go to the spa, and she comes with a list, and I have my own list, and suddenly you've found an hour for yourself, and you've gone through your work assignments. I think part of our challenge is really developing new ways of being able to intersect the networking and the responsibilities that women general counsel have today as well as women partners."

Menendez-Cambo also hit on the winning strategy of inviting Smith and her children to her house when they are in town.

"I love my children," Smith said. "You find an avenue with my children, I will remember you. It's not that complicated. Don't ask me to join a club because that's segregation in my mind, either through money, race, religion, some kind. But invite me over, and I wear jeans just like you do. Invite my children over. And that to me is how you get my business."

Camacho of Microsoft attends conferences and seminars geared to women in an effort to network with female lawyers.

"Men are very good at building networks; women are very good at finding friends," she said. "I do believe in order to get more references we need to know more people, we need to create a pipeline, and for me that's the main reason I attend this type of seminar. Whenever I go to these events I am looking for friends of friends, I am looking for women talent, I am looking for women to bring to Microsoft."

Corporate Priority

Also helping move the needle for women is the fact that some Fortune 500 corporations—including Microsoft Latin America Corp., Hewlett Packard Co. and Wal-Mart Stores Inc.—require a percentage of its outside counsel to include women and minorities, Cornejo noted.

"If a company doesn't have a diversity goal in terms of law firm hires, then nothing happens," she said. "I think the majority of law firms are run by men, and some don't care about diversity. They do what's politically correct, and a lot of times ... it's just window dressing."

For years, Miami-Dade State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle has hosted an annual Latin Lady Lawyers dinner at her house for top female Hispanic lawyers to celebrate their accomplishments, discuss charitable projects and network.

"It's important to know who's doing what—who is the new attorney for the city of Miami, who is running for judge, who is up for partnership," she said.

Rundle is proud that her office, a prime training ground for litigators, has 201 female lawyers out of 315, or 64 percent, and that 60 percent of her management is female.

"When I came here there were only four women," she said. "But there's no glass ceiling here. It's all based on performance, it's based on your work ethic, your hard work. Everything is very open and transparent. We're intent on not being that old boys club."

Copyright 2014. ALM Media Properties, LLC. All rights reserved.