



Retaining and Mentoring Women and Minority Lawyers

By Judy L. Marchman

Speaking at the annual CLE program of Texas Women Lawyers in Austin, **Linda C. Schoonmaker** related a story from early in her career to illustrate the difficulties women lawyers can face balancing a career and a family. She went on bed rest four months into her pregnancy but worked at a supportive firm that sent her flowers and continued to pay her while she couldn't work.

"When I had delivered my child — keeping in mind that I had not walked in five months — I was due back after eight weeks of disability. I had it all planned out ... I'd read that if I were to come back on a Wednesday, I'd just work Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, then have off the weekend. ... I came back, they found something for me to do, and I worked 21 days straight."

Schoonmaker, now a partner in Seyfarth Shaw, L.L.P. in Houston, ended up leaving that earlier firm to start her own in order to find the flexibility she needed. She is not alone in her quest. The United States does not require paid maternity leave. In a survey recently conducted by Texas Women Lawyers of Texas law firms, ranging from sole practitioners to firms with more than 200 attorneys, larger firms tend to have a written maternity leave policy but smaller firms tend to offer greater flexibility. The amount of paid leave ranged from no time to 12 weeks. The survey also found that most firms provide full benefits for attorneys returning from leave if they work at least 30 hours a week and that the majority of women return to work full time. So how can law firms help their women lawyers achieve that important balance between career and family instead of having them decide to leave?

During the Texas Women Lawyers program, that issue was examined as part of a panel discussion on the mentoring and retention of women and minorities in law firms. Moderated by **Andrea M. Johnson**, a partner in the women-owned firm of Powers & Frost, L.L.P. in Houston, the panel included Schoonmaker; **Debra Tsuchiyama Baker**, a partner in Connelly, Baker, Wotring, L.L.P. in Houston; **Nina Cortell**, a partner in Haynes and Boones, L.L.P. in Dallas and chair of the State Bar

of Texas Task Force on Hiring, Retention and Promotion of Minority and Women Attorneys in Large and Medium Size Law Firms and Corporations; **Marcy Hogan Greer**, a partner in Fulbright & Jaworski, L.L.P. in Austin; and **Martin Wickliff**, managing partner in Epstein, Becker, Green, Wickliff & Hall, P.C. in Houston.

Flexible scheduling was discussed as part of the retention issue. Greer said she had had the opportunity to start on a modified work schedule at a previous firm and asked for a similar situation when she joined Fulbright & Jaworski. There, she was appointed to "a working group on women and minorities in the profession." The group was given a broad mandate to work on improving retention, and one of the first proposals was a modified work schedule for women.

"I'm a big believer that at different times in our careers, people need flexibility. You want people to feel there is a possibility ... that they don't have to leave," said Greer.

Cortell added that flex policies are a positive development. "Texas is really in the forefront of providing options to lawyers to have greater flexibility, to retain partnership credit, to work with the flex time." She raised the concern, however, that the business model of law firms is working against the recruitment and retention of many women and minorities.

"When a law firm loses a lawyer, the estimated cost to the firm is between \$200,000 and \$400,000," said Cortell. "It's a huge cost to the firm to bring the lawyer in, train the lawyer, then lose the lawyer. It's also a cost to the client. You develop a relationship with the client and they learn to depend on you, then you leave. That's very bad for client relations."

In looking at why firms should improve their diversity, the panel discussed how diversity is already being driven by client demands but that ultimately it just makes good business sense.

"When you look at a mixture of people who are part of the decision making on a case or on a deal, to get the opinions of persons of diverse backgrounds to help solve a problem is very fundamental. It leads to better decision making, better conclusions," said Wickliff.

"A sponsor is the person in the room who can make a difference for you, who has the ear of the partners committee, who can bring you along to go out and get the business. Sponsorship is something you earn."

— Marcy Hogan Greer



ACHIEVING WORK/LIFE BALANCE

In February, Greenberg Traurig, L.L.P. hosted its second annual Women's Initiative in Dallas. Executives from AT&T, Polo Ralph Lauren Corp., Alcon Laboratories, Inc., EDS, SES Americom, Wachovia, Morgan Stanley, and Smith International shared their experiences and provided tips for breaking the glass ceiling, balancing life and work, taking charge of one's health, and giving back to the community. Panelists discussed juggling day care, holidays, personal time, and work load, and how they achieve work/life balance through supportive families and bosses, determination, and smart work:



Greenberg Traurig partner Katherine Compton (left) with keynote speaker Gloria Campos

- *Breaking the Glass Ceiling* — Work smart, focus on performance integrity to gain respect among co-workers, be persistent, and treat everyone with respect.
- *Balancing Career and Personal Life* — Set aside time for family and stick to it. Make an appointment with your-

self and your family and treat it like you would any other appointment. In this day and age of electronics you can always stay in touch whether you are at a baseball game or recital. Limit interruptions to your personal life as you would limit interruptions to a meeting.

- *Taking Charge of Your Health* — Dedicate time to manage your health and you will perform at the top of your game. Schedule time to recharge whether it is hitting the gym, meditating, or taking time for a manicure. Get in the habit of keeping doctor appointments. Your productivity will improve when you set aside time for yourself.
- *Giving Back to the Community* — Find a single cause you are most passionate about and dedicate a couple of hours of your time each month. Focus on areas where you can make the most impact.

Greenberg Traurig presented its "Integrity in Action Award" to Ambassador Nancy Brinker, chief of Protocol for the United States and founder of Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. A breast cancer survivor herself, Brinker started the foundation after she lost her sister at age 36 to breast cancer. — *Susan Brennan*

The panelists concurred that all new lawyers, not just women and minority lawyers, need to be taught the business of law firm life as a way to improve retention.

"In exit interviews, young attorneys who lasted 90 days say, 'It's so different [from the internship program]!' It's hard work, it requires a lot of hours, and not everyone is interested in that and that's OK, but no one's telling them that," said Baker, who pointed out that many young lawyers aren't entering their time and getting their bills out as they should because of lack of proper training.

The panelists discussed mentoring and sponsorship programs as a way to help young lawyers learn how to develop business and feel a greater connection to the firm — something that is especially important for women and minority lawyers who might feel isolated in firm life.

"When you are a minority lawyer going to a new firm, there is a high degree of isolation that you feel," Wickliff said. "You start looking around at the people who used to smile at you but now they don't smile. They're not as warm and fuzzy as they used to be." Wickliff said that in that situation, women and minority attorneys benefit from a sponsor — someone to advocate for them, give them meaningful work, and help them develop their careers.

Added Greer: "A mentor, at least as it's evolving in our firm, is someone who would enjoy helping you and teaching you things. A sponsor is the person in the room who can make a difference for you, who has the ear of the partners committee, who can bring you along to go out and get the

business. Sponsorship is something you earn."

From flexible schedules to clients demanding diverse teams to sponsorship and mentoring, Cortell said all of these things are "huge positives" but added that the issues of diversity and retention are a constant day-by-day struggle. "It is something we have to pay attention to, personally and also as advocates within our law firms, for policies that make our journey possible. I am ultimately optimistic. I think we can get there." ✪

The Texas Women Lawyers' maternity leave survey was spearheaded by Jeanne C. "Cezy" Collins of Kemp Smith, L.L.P. in El Paso. Texas Tech University School of Law professors Jennifer Horn and Rosemary Dillon volunteered to analyze the survey results and prepared a report that is available at www.texaswomenlawyers.org.

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