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FIRM BELIEVERS

These 7 women lawyers have risen to the top of their profession on the law firm side

By BERNADETTE STARZEE

Law firms see a high attrition rate among women attorneys, with many leaving for legal positions in the corporate or government sectors as they progress in their careers. While 46 percent of law firm associates are women, just 30 percent of non-equity partners and 19 percent of equity partners are women, according to a 2017 report by the National Association of Women Lawyers.

While some women attorneys who are juggling family and career responsibilities take an alternate route in search of better work/life balance, there are those who have chosen to stay with their law firms. LIBN spoke with seven women attorneys who have risen to the top of their professions on the law firm side about why they have stayed the course. While these leading lawyers may have considered other options over the years, especially when their children were young, they stayed on the firm side for a variety of reasons, including loyalty to their firm and colleagues, good compensation, a shortage of good in-house opportunities on Long Island, a deep affinity for their practice areas and a love of the work itself.

When she discovered she was pregnant the day before law school graduation, Lesley Reardon at first opted for a position with West Publishing, a legal publishing company, figuring it would afford good work/life balance.

However, an attorney for whom she had clerked quickly came recruiting, and she wound up joining

Photo by Jim Lennon

KATY COLE: 'I like being busy and I like being challenged.'

JENNIFER HILLMAN: She finds the trusts and estates practice area to be highly interesting and collegial.

Garden City law firm Rosenberg Calica & Birney, where, 23 years later, she is a partner.

Reardon has stayed with the firm for the long haul for a number of reasons.

"It's part loyalty; the firm recruited me and has been good to me, and [senior partner] Ron Rosenberg has been an incredible mentor," she said. "When your kids are young, you think about leaving, but the money was good – it was like golden handcuffs. And the cases were very interesting." A commercial litigator, she often litigates disputes between the principals of family-owned businesses.

Judi Abbott Curry, a member in the Uniondale office of Harris Beach, also spoke of "golden handcuffs" keeping her in the firm, especially in the early days.

"I was the primary breadwinner in my household; my husband is a teacher, and he stayed home with the kids until they were age 5, and then he worked a half-mile from home, so I had that support," she said. Over the years, the attorney, who co-leads the firm's medical and life sciences industry team, considered going in-house to a client, but it would probably have meant leaving Long Island, which she didn't want to do. "Many of the

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drug companies are in Northern California or New Jersey," she noted.

Meanwhile Curry grew in stature in the firm, developing her expertise in certain pharmaceutical and medical device categories. "As a woman in the department, I was given all the cases that had to do with women's products or product affecting women, such as contraceptives or pharmaceuticals alleged to have caused birth defects in pregnant women," she said. Curry went on to become the first woman named to the firm-wide management committee.

Loyalty was a big factor for Jennifer Hurley McGay, an attorney who started her career in Manhattan with a "group of attorneys that I really liked." She was part of a close-knit business litigation group that moved around to a couple of firms and stayed together through mergers and acquisitions.

"I thought about in-house positions when my kids were little, but I liked the people I worked with, and I never had time to go on interviews anyway," McGay said. "It never seemed like a good time to leave, and then I became an equity partner."

The group started to disband in recent years and McGay decided to make a move – but to another law firm, this one on Long Island. She joined Lewis Johs Avallone Aviles in Islandia as a partner last year.

"I knew this firm for 20 years and it was the first one I looked at when I thought about coming out to Long Island," McGay said. "It was a big change, but going the firm route was what I knew, as opposed to the in-house or government routes. I find the work exciting. I enjoy writing my own briefs and arguing my own cases, and the collegial nature of a law firm." She also doubted in-house positions in her practice area would be overly flexible in terms of work/life balance.

Katy Cole, a partner at Farrell Fritz in Uniondale, describes herself as a Type A personality.

"I like being busy and I like being challenged," she said. She enjoys the "contentment and security" of her position at Farrell Fritz, where she has worked for nine years and has developed deep expertise in commercial litigation and e-discovery.

While she was on maternity leave from Lake Success-based Pegalis & Erickson in the mid-1980s, Annamarie Bondi-Stoddard was asked to move up to the role of managing attorney. It wasn't easy in the early days – her husband worked in the restaurant business and he had long hours – but she made it work. The money was good, and "the work is very rewarding," said Bondi-Stoddard, who is managing partner of the firm today and continues to represents plaintiffs in medical negligence cases. Her firm does not get paid until the case is successfully settled, and that can take several years. "The people we represent are hurting and we provide a lot of handholding," she said. "And when we are able to help them and make their lives better, it's very rewarding."

Loyalty to the firm was a big reason that Jennifer Hillman has stayed the course at Ruskin Moscou Faltischek in Uniondale, where she is a partner who concentrates her practice in trusts and estates litigation. "I feel the firm and practice group have allowed me good work/life balance," she said, adding that she finds her practice area highly interesting and collegial.

"It's a small group; I know all my adversaries," she said. "We might fight it out in court, but then we'll say, 'I'll give you a ride home.'"

Attorney Ana Shields also has a deep interest in her practice area – employment law – which she practices as a principal in the Melville office of national law firm Jackson Lewis.

"I was lucky enough to pick a firm where I feel supported, and I work with great people – we have all come up together," she said. "I have the resources and backing from the firm to excel in my practice. I like my clients and I like litigation."

As an attorney in a law firm, "you are value-added – a profit center," she added. "Attorneys who work in-house at a company are a cost center, and in recent years there has been increasing pressure on budgets and the need to demonstrate their value."

At the end of the day, these law firm veterans are happy in their work.

"I enjoy what I do," Hillman said. "I don't know if I would have the opportunity to practice law the same way elsewhere."

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Photo by Bob Giglione

ANNAMARIE BONDI-STODDARD: Defending plaintiffs in medical negligence cases is 'very rewarding.'

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