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LAW FIRM PROGRAMS CATER TO WORKING MOMS

by Julie Kay

Stephanie Traband spends summers in Sarasota, where her young son, who suffers from cerebral palsy, attends camp. She also takes him to Duke University in North Carolina for frequent stem-cell treatments.

But that doesn't stop the Miami lawyer from getting her work done as a commercial litigator and enforcing creditors' rights. In fact, Traband, a mother of two young sons, recently made equity partner at Levine Kellogg Lehman Schneider + Grossman.

"I would describe our firm as refugees from large firms, so the cultures may be different," Traband said. "When they started the firm, they wanted to put the focus on work-life balance. I could be taking calls from the side of the baseball field or working remotely on documents from Sarasota, but as long as I get my work done, that's all that matters."

For the thousands of South Florida lawyers who are working mothers, balancing the demands of work and family can be challenging, frustrating and exhausting. Trying to meet strict billable-hour requirements, satisfy demanding clients, make equity partner—and get to day care or school in time to pick up their children—can pile on the stress.

As a result, when they decide to start families, some female lawyers leave Big Law for smaller firms, start their own firms or go in-house at companies where they may have more control over their schedules. Others may choose to become non-equity or contract lawyers, sacrificing the hope of making equity partner (and the big bucks) in exchange for more manageable work hours and sometimes the ability to work from home. Still other working moms may go part-time, which is not an option at many law firms.

"Everyone hears horror stories of how

working mothers are treated at some law firms—like the story of one woman whose law firm started calling her less than 24 hours after she gave birth," said Deb Baker, president of the Miami chapter of the Florida Association for Women Lawyers. "I think there's been a vast improvement over when I started practicing law 15 years ago—the understanding of work-life balance has improved. But it's not perfect, and law firms have a ways to go, and women don't want to talk about it and get branded whistleblowers."

RETAINING WOMEN

Law firm managers are aware of the phenomenon. In addition to women's initiatives and diversity groups, law firms have in recent years launched various programs to retain or attract working mothers.

OnRamp was started last year by a longtime legal recruiter, Colorado-based Caren Ulrich Stacy. Concerned by the lack of women at the top levels of law firms, Ulrich Stacy wanted to find a way to help experienced female lawyers who left the workforce to raise children get rehired.

"On occasion, there would be a female applicant who had a significant gap on her resume from staying home to raise children," she said. "People would say, 'How do you know she can hit the ground running?' The practice leader would say, 'It's too risky to hire her.'"

Ulrich Stacy, herself a working mother, wound up creating a unique, one-year fellowship program in which law firms would offer lawyers a salaried fellowship for one year consisting of intense retraining with unlimited CLEs and a personal career counselor.

Ulrich Stacy was stunned at the overwhelming support from law firms for the program. Already, 15 have signed up nationwide, including Akerman in



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Miami. She deliberately limited the program to one law firm in each major geographical market.

So far, nine women have been placed at law firms out of 170 applicants. The program will expand to 80 women in the second year.

"The hope is they will get hired by the law firm at the end of the year," Ulrich Stacy said. "At the minimum, the woman can take the skills she obtained and leverage them into a new job."

Akerman recently signed onto the program.

"We anticipate that our participation in the OnRamp program will provide Akerman's clients and our firm with access to a group of experienced, high-performing women lawyers who will help advance the Akerman client experience," said Carol Faber, chair of the firm's women's initiative. "This program is consistent with our commitment to build a supportive and inclusive environment enriched by a diversity of backgrounds and ideas, while simultaneously sending a powerful message to women lawyers that there are many avenues to success."

Other firm participants are Baker Donelson Berman Caldwell & Berkowitz, Blank Rome, Hogan Lovells and K&L Gates.

FLEX-TIME ATTORNEYS

Another program that has helped working mothers—even though that wasn't the initial goal—is Littler's CaseSmart program.

The brainchild of Littler Miami partner Scott Forman, CaseSmart was launched to reduce costs to labor and employment clients after the recession. It does so by utilizing non-equity, flex-time attorneys who work at home. Ninety percent of them are women, the majority working mothers. There are also disabled and elderly lawyers who have difficulty commuting to an office, including a retired judge and a dwarf.

"The program has been a huge success," Forman said. "It provides clients with lowered rates ... and provides jobs for individuals who would be outside the workforce consistent with their work-life balance needs, plus it furthers Littler's diversity initiatives. We see it as a win-win-win."

One of the flex-time attorneys is Emily Morris of Lexington, Ky. In 2010, the 33-year-old attorney was a Littler associate and the mother of a 1-year-old and a 5-year-old when Littler debuted CaseSmart. She grabbed the opportunity and never looked back.

"My husband and I both worked full-time jobs and had busy careers," she said. "I did not like the feeling at the end of the day if my child was the last one picked up at preschool. It was a constant rush to get everything finished in time."

Morris didn't mind jumping off the partnership track and taking a pay cut in exchange for not having to spend time getting dressed up, commuting, looking for parking and working longer hours.

"I'm still able to do great work for great clients but with the flexibility I was looking for," she said. "The flex-time attorneys position offered the best of both worlds."

MATERNITY LEAVE

In late 2013, Holland & Knight made a major investment in working mothers by expanding its maternity leave from 12 to 16 weeks, with four weeks for a "ramp up" and "ramp down" period where billable-hour requirements are annualized, giving them a grace period. The firm said it was trying to attract and retain female lawyers.

One of the lawyers who took advantage of the program was 34-year-old Monica Vila Castro. She returned to work in February 2014.

Not only did the maternity leave not hinder her career, but she made partner just months after returning.

"I have friends who are at smaller law firms or inside counsel who ... are pretty envious of my firm's maternity leave policy," Castro said. "I don't know anyone who has 16 weeks plus an additional four weeks. The firm made this an easy transition for me."

Carlton Fields Jordan Burt was also accommodating to Amy Furness, who was recently promoted to co-managing shareholder of the Miami office and has a 6-year-old son.

When Furness was diagnosed with a high-risk pregnancy, the firm allowed her to work at home for an extended period, setting her up with a laptop with remote access to all firm business. Then, when her grandmother was dying in Philadelphia, the firm allowed her to move her entire practice there and work remotely so she could care for her.

"That sensitivity to female attorneys and that support is something that I admire in the firm and what I'd like to emulate as office co-managing shareholder," she said.

IMMINENT COMMITMENT

Barbara Viota-Sawich dealt with being a working mother and lawyer in a different way. The part-time contract lawyer at Broad and Cassel in Fort Lauderdale took herself off the partnership track from the start and is fine with never being a partner.

"My husband is an oral surgeon, and he doesn't have the time to devote to the kids, and someone had to," said Viota-Sawich, 36, who has two small children. "I work three days a week. This way I can run around and do all the things you have to do as a mom, go to ballet class and swim class. I was never on that super hard-core professional track. I always knew I wanted to have kids."

The path for women in law is often filled with pitfalls. Katie Phang left a Coral Gables law firm, Seipp, Flick & Hosley, to start her own firm after determining "I didn't see myself becoming a partner anytime soon."

Phang said she continually tried to bring her own clients into the law firm but was discouraged.

"They looked at me and patted me on the shoulder and said, 'Just continue servicing our client,' " said Phang, 39. "I didn't see myself becoming a partner anytime soon. I saw a bunch of middle-aged white guys in charge."

John Seipp, Seipp Flick's managing partner, denied Phang's assertions. He noted Phang worked for the firm twice, asking to return after a brief stint with another firm. He also said 35 percent of the partners and 44 percent of the attorneys at the firm are women or minorities.

"As a general policy, we do not rehire persons who have left our firm," he said. "She said this was the place she wanted to spend the rest of her career."

Seipp said Phang expressed an interest in starting a family law practice, which his firm wasn't interested in. He said the firm spent more than \$10,000 supporting Phang's practice, including paying for her to attend a Defense Research Institute Women in the Law seminar in Phoenix.

After several years running her own firm, Phang recently joined Berger Singerman as a Miami partner. She interviewed with the firm when nine months pregnant with her first child.

"I said, 'Um, I obviously have a commitment imminently arriving,' " she said of her interview with senior partner Paul Singerman. "They said to take as much time as I needed after giving birth."

She said the firm was impressed with her practice, her service as treasurer on the Florida Association for Women Lawyers and on a Florida Bar grievance committee and teaching at the University of Miami School of Law. And being an Asian female didn't hurt. "They hit a double minority," Phang laughed.

For FAWL, helping working mothers find workable solutions is one of its key missions. Frequently hearing new working mothers complain about their inability to balance work and family, Baker and other members offer this mantra: "It gets better."

"We wanted that to be our slogan, 'It gets better,' " Baker said. "We want them to know that it does."

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