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Trial lawyer, former judge
and now managing partner
at Dorsey & Whitney,
Marianne Short and three
other women leaders talk
about their journeys.





RISING TO THE

WOMEN LAWYERS TAKE THE HELM THE CHANGING FACE OF FIRM LEADERSHIP

BY STEVEN T. TAYLOR

2007 may be a watershed year for women lawyers moving into firm leadership. *Law Practice* talks with four women in the top tiers who are inspiring the next generation of law firm leaders.

MARIANNE SHORT

Managing Partner
Dorsey & Whitney
Minneapolis

Photo: Mike Habermann

THE TOP

From a Novelty to the Norm

In 1985, long before becoming managing partner at Minneapolis's Dorsey & Whitney, Marianne Short tried a case in a small Montana town.

It was to be a run-of-the-mill case that no one attended except the parties involved and those compelled to testify. The morning session went as one would expect. At the midday break, Short ate a quiet lunch at a diner around the corner from the courthouse. But when she made her way back for the afternoon session, it was clear that something had

changed. Short saw throngs of local townspeople lined up to squeeze into the courtroom. "The place was packed," she recalls. "As I walked to the door it was like parting the seas. I just assumed someone famous was being sentenced, or that there was some sort of controversy."

But it was neither of those things that had brought out the locals. Instead, during the lunch break word had gotten out that there was a *woman lawyer* in the courtroom. The townspeople were coming to check her out. "Word spread: 'We've got one of *those* in our courtroom,'" Short says, adding that she could only laugh, shrug and carry on. By the next day, the novelty had worn off and the trial calmly proceeded.

Twenty-two years later, of course, women lawyers are no longer viewed as some sort of sideshow attractions. Indeed, women in the legal profession, as the phrase goes, have "come a long way, baby." This is not to say that obstacles to advancement within law firms and the profession as a whole do not persist—they certainly do. (See the sidebar on page 45.) Nonetheless, strides forward continue to be made, with women lawyers increasingly entering top management roles, following in the path laid by pioneers such as Mary Cranston and Debora de Hoyos, who both stepped down from their long-held positions earlier this year—Cranston had been chair at Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman, and de Hoyos managing partner at Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw.

In fact, 2007 may turn out to be a watershed year for women moving into positions of law firm leadership. So what's the face of those making the ascension? Let's look at four women lawyers who have made the journey into firm management. In the following they talk about their careers, obstacles to leadership and management styles.

Marshalling with Gentle Persuasion

If 2007 might be deemed a milestone year for women lawyers entering leadership, the Twin Cities could be considered the epicenter. In January, women at three Minneapolis-St. Paul-based law firms took the helm as managing partners: Short at Dorsey & Whitney, Tamara Hjelle Olsen at Gray, Plant, Mooty, and Tonia Teasley Schulz at Oppenheimer Wolf & Donnelly. "It was like a wave was washing over the city, and it was great," says

WOMEN LEADERS

Karen MacKay, a law firm management and professional development consultant at Kerma Partners.

Short isn't surprised that law firms in her home state are elevating women to the top. "We like to think we're progressive in Minnesota," she says. "It goes back to our political roots with Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy and Walter Mondale."

The 56-year-old trial specialist and former judge says her own familial roots probably laid the groundwork for her legal career. "I'm from a large family, so probably my interest in law came from all the dinnertime debates around the table." As one of seven children, she would hear and participate in many household discussions about the hot-button issues of the 1960s and '70s.

After graduating from Boston College Law School, Short worked for a year and a half at the state attorney general's office and interviewed with several law firms. And here's a time when she faced the sort of gender discrimination that infected much of the profession during those years—and to a certain extent still does.

"Hiring partners would say, 'Are you sure you don't want to go into trusts and estates or something else that's better suited for you?'" she recalls. "That was in the mid-'70s and people would talk like that. Now they may think that, but they'll never say it. Women were stereotyped into certain practice areas. I hope we're beyond that now."

But Short was impressed with Dorsey, joined the firm and immediately began trying cases. Then, in 1988, she was appointed to the appellate bench, a position she accepted because she saw it as her duty and also for personal reasons—her judgeship would allow more time with her two young children than would private practice: "Going on the bench was the perfect family planning, if you will. I was home every night for dinner with my husband and kids."

In 2000, though, as Short hit the half-century mark, with her oldest child heading off to college and her youngest entering high school, she decided she'd served the court long enough and came back to Dorsey. Over the next several years she served the firm on multiple committees—including investment, capital contribution, partner compensation and professional personnel—before assuming the managing partner mantle on January 1 of this year.

One of Short's first moves as managing partner of the firm—which has approximately 650 lawyers and 18 offices—was to trim the size of its executive committee from twelve partners to six. "I picked six very strong egos, not all of a similar mind," she says. Why do so? "I think bringing in strong people—even people who might com-

pete with me—makes me stronger."

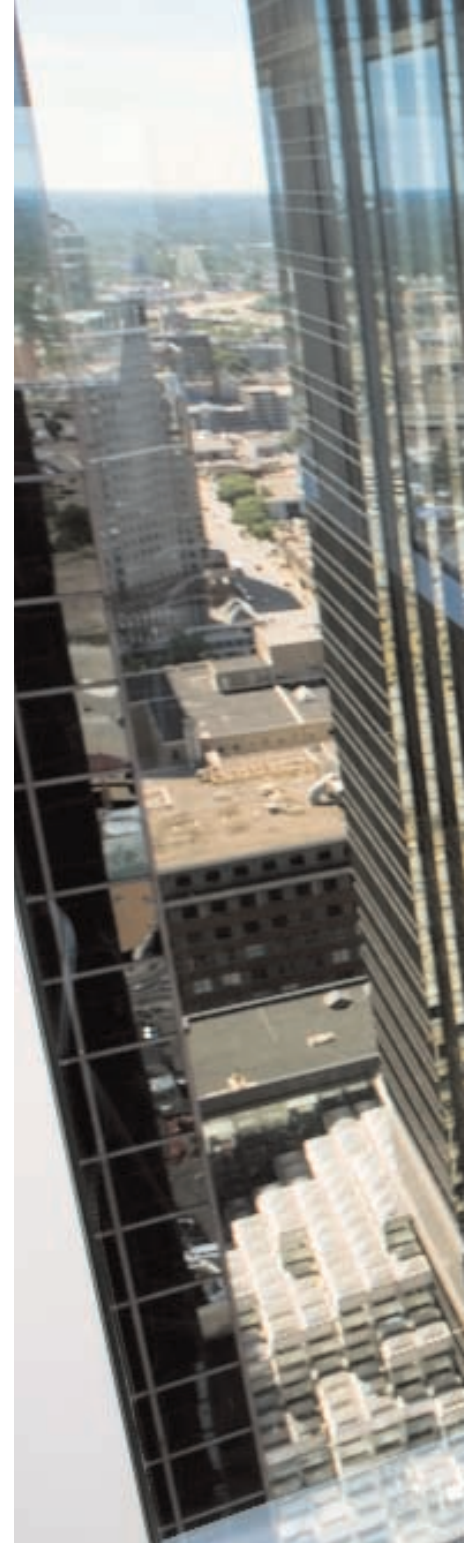
She says her ability to listen to the ideas of those partners and "marshal them into a cohesive whole" reflects her management style. "I went to a high school in St. Paul and was taught by a group of nuns," Short says, "and they had a sort of gentle persuasion. I think that's how I lead. I try to embrace people and bring them along. And yes, I feel that's more of a female trait."

Managing "From the Heart," Laughter Included

Several blocks away from Dorsey & Whitney's offices, Tonia Teasley Schulz was also appointed managing partner—of the 100-plus-lawyer Oppenheimer Wolff & Donnelly—at the start of this year.

Schulz, age 48, has taken several paths during her career—she practiced in Texas, then with two different firms in Minnesota and California, left the profession for three years, and then served as a legal headhunter. She was hired by Oppenheimer in 1999 to be director of associate development and served in various management capacities—including acting as executive director—before assuming the firm's managing partner title. And in August Schulz announced that, as of September 1, she was joining the Emmerich Group as executive vice president. [Editor's Note: The announcement came as *Law Practice* was nearing press time.]

With David Potter, the firm's chair, Schulz oversaw a firm whose 2007-2009 strategic plan includes continuing to





TONIA TEASLEY SCHULZ

Former Managing Partner
Oppenheimer Wolff & Donnelly
Minneapolis

Photo: Rebecca Prentis

increase the number of women partners *and* the number of women in management roles. “We are proud of the efforts and progress made toward increasing the number of women partners and women in management at Oppenheimer. Women make up 29 percent of the partners in management roles and more than 80 percent of our professional management staff (non-attorneys) are women, even after Tonia’s departure,” says Potter. In 2005 the firm had no women partners represented in management.

Like Short, Schulz cites open communication as the lynchpin to her success as a leader. “I do a lot of listening to people because I consider my biggest job is helping people become more successful, helping them figure out what they really want to do, what they get excited about—and getting them to think they can be better than they currently are. It’s all about dealing with people from the heart.”

The mere fact that Schulz uses that phrase—“from the



LYDIA BUGDEN
Management Committee Member
Stewart McKelvey
Halifax, Nova Scotia
Photo: Dan Callis

heart”—says something about the state of the profession in the 21st century: It has evolved. Even 15 to 20 years ago you wouldn’t hear a law firm leader utter such an expression, let alone take that kind of approach. But now, as Schulz puts it, “Law firms are doing more work in developing talent and caring about the people in the organization. It’s a lot more acceptable to talk about that today.”

And then there’s her sense of humor, without which, she says, she would not be as effective a manager. “I have to be able to laugh at myself and the situation sometimes,” she says. Her wit was also valuable earlier in her varied career—once notably saving the day by turning what could have been an awkward, even angry, situation into a passing, lighthearted moment. The experience also demonstrates the sexism that she and countless other professional women have encountered.

In 1984, a few years removed from the University of Minnesota School of Law, Schulz was an associate with a Texas firm in its banking law department. She was called to New York to give a long and thorough presentation on the structure and complexities of bank-holding companies to a group of high-powered financiers. When she finished, one of the members of the bank’s board, composed exclusively of white males, turned to her and asked, “When is the lawyer going to come?”

A quick-thinking Schulz defused the situation. “I could have gotten mad and ranted but that wouldn’t have helped me,” she says. “And, it wouldn’t have helped him. So I said, ‘Well, I am the lawyer and hopefully I’ll do just as good a job for you as the male who’s out in the hall getting us all coffee.’ They all laughed. I’m sure they were a little embarrassed. But I got the point across, did it in a way that no one felt

Pitfalls in the Partnership Pipeline: Less But Hardly Gone

Women have undoubtedly come a long way in the legal profession in recent decades. But not far enough, according to many women *and* men in and around the profession. While more and more women are entering law school, graduating and joining law firms, many are still leaving the practice before reaching the partnership ranks, despite concerted efforts by many firms to enhance retention among female associates.

"Many complex reasons account for this attrition," says Karen MacKay, a law firm consultant at Kerma Partners. "But one persists: Women still carry the burden of being the primary caregiver—no matter how enlightened a couple may be. So it's difficult to keep the pipeline to partnership filled. That is, some 60 percent of law students are now women. And at the associate level it's 50-50, women to men. But at the partnership level it's closer to 20 percent women to 80 percent men."

Or lower, depending on where you look. A report earlier this year by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Workplace Center, titled *Women Lawyers and Obstacles to Leadership*, draws from two surveys that tracked 1,000 female lawyers at Bay State law firms over five years. The researchers-writers, Mona Harrington and Helen Hsi, reported the partnership ratio was 17 percent women to 83 percent men. A 2005 study by the National Association for Law Placement reported the same dismal 17 percent on a national level. (For more on the MIT study, read "What's a Girl to Do?" in the July/August issue of *Law Practice*.)

Of course, the pull to parenthood isn't the only reason women leave. Anecdotal evidence reveals a harsh reality: Many male lawyers still discriminate—overtly or more often subtly—against their female colleagues.

"Is there still a bias? Of course there is," says a legal profession insider who asked to remain anonymous. "I recently witnessed this at a major law firm: Two women associates are talking with a male associate. A male partner comes up and says, 'I have a golf game with a client and I need a fourth.' It doesn't even occur to him to ask or even look at the women. And it's through golf and other outings with clients that young lawyers build relationships and advance in their firm."

Hundreds of other women have experienced similar treatment, and many of their stories are articulated in the well-researched book *Ending the Gauntlet: Removing Barriers to Women's Success in the Law*, by Lauren Stiller Rikleen (Thomson, 2006). While Stiller Rikleen is a senior partner at Worcester, Massachusetts-based Bowditch & Dewey, her ascension didn't come without frustration; it did, alas, come without female mentors. On her way along the partnership track, she writes, "I saw other women arrive at the firm, struggle, and leave."

Here's to the day when the struggles are completely past.

— Steve Taylor

bad, and we were able to go on with the meeting."

While at Oppenheimer, Schulz was unique in that unlike many managing partners, she was a non-practicing lawyer, something that carries distinct advantages. For example, some managing partners are reluctant to cut back on their client work. Schulz didn't have that dilemma.

Schulz gladly gives advice to others when they seek it out. "I tell those who ask to consider their primary motivation as not about themselves but about helping others," she says. "That's how you become known as a leader in the firm. You can find ways to be visible as a leader even when you're not officially the committee head or serve in other formal leadership roles."

In her new position, Schulz will continue to advise leaders—this time, helping financial institutions with cultural transformation issues. "After eight years with Oppenheimer, I made the difficult decision to pursue a new career path," she says. "I firmly believe in the quote by Eleanor Roosevelt that says, 'Do one thing every day that scares you.' This quote has always inspired me to continually grow both personally as well as professionally and seize new opportunities that push you further than you ever thought possible."

Influencing with a Resolute Mind-set

For Lydia Bugden, a 40-year-old junior partner at Halifax, Nova Scotia-based Stewart McKelvey, leadership came calling at a young age. It happened in 2002, when she was asked to have her name placed on the ballot for a seat on the firm's management committee. Her colleagues voted her on board, and she has served as one of the firm's decision makers ever since.

She seems well suited to help lead her firm, which has more than 210 lawyers in six locations. "I've always wanted to be a part of organizing in whatever I've done," she says. "I don't have to be the kingpin on every committee to be satisfied with my role. But I do like to have my finger in the pie."

After graduating from law school at the University of New Brunswick in 1991, Bugden worked as an associate at a small Halifax firm, then left private practice to move to Toronto and serve as in-house counsel for Tim Hortons, Canada's largest donut franchise. An energy company hired her away and that's where, as in-house counsel, she began working with Stewart McKelvey lawyers on a major energy project. When the firm offered her a position, she happily accepted.

In her career, Bugden says, she hasn't encountered much gender discrimination. "It's hard for me to say there's a glass ceiling because I've been very fortunate to have had the opportunities I've had. And I've had great partners who see the benefit of having a strong team and aren't concerned about male domination."

She says that many law firms in Canada have women serving in leadership roles. However, because many of the corporate executives continue to be older males, women do continue to face challenges in generating their own clients.

"There still are a number of impediments keeping [female lawyers] from developing their own client base," she says, "in part because of the structure of the business community. While we see more and more women moving up in the ranks of Corporate Canada, there are still significantly more males in important roles than females and they tend to identify with male attorneys." Like other women who help steer their firms, Bugden uses consensus building to shape strategic direction. "Women more often try to lead by building relationships first," she says. "I know I do that. That being said, I am also a very black-and-white decision maker in that I set my mind on something and work hard to accomplish it. It's just that I don't plow through people."

So have other women influenced her leadership style? "I can't say I've had a woman role model. In the generation ahead of me, there just weren't many women who went into the profession, let alone found ways to stick it out." Although, she says, "I've heard stories and there were clearly barriers for them to

get past. 'Work-life balance' just weren't buzzwords back then."

Fortunately, the times have changed, at least at some firms. And with her prestigious position at Stewart—and two kids at home—Bugden has clearly found the desired balance and done much more than "stick it out."

Acquiring the Skills to Inspire Others

In a Chicago law office in 1991, young defense attorney Sandra Ezell walked into a conference room prepared to depose a coroner for a case involving a gruesome industrial accident. She had to stop when the plaintiff's attorney, a man, gestured toward her and said, "The court reporter's here."

Later that same attorney issued her a warning about some of the accident scene pictures that showed mangled body parts and brain matter. "These pictures are awfully graphic," he said. "You probably don't want to look at them." Naturally, it was her job to examine the photos.

"Of course I had to look at them," Ezell says. "But I guess he thought that because I was this 'young lady,' I might not have the stomach for them, that I couldn't handle the gore. I remember it took me a while to be offended at his comments. I wondered why he said that. After a while, you understand why people are making comments."

Ezell's not likely to hear such condescending directives very often these days. In October 2005, she became the managing partner of the Richmond, Virginia, office of Bowman and Brooke, which has six total offices across the country and is one of the nation's top litigation firms.

Among Ezell's many clients are automakers and auto parts manufacturers. And there's a little irony in that. She grew up in Rochester, Michigan, in the shadow of Detroit's Big Three. But neither her mother nor father worked in the





SANDRA EZELL
Managing Partner, Richmond Office
Bowman and Brooke
Richmond, Virginia
Photo: Craig Litten

automotive industry. “I was the only kid in my neighborhood whose family wasn’t associated with automakers,” she says. “My dad was a college professor. So, yes, I guess it’s ironic that I spend a lot of my time flying to Detroit.”

Ezell, now 40, graduated from the University of Michigan School of Law, worked for the Chicago firm Lord, Bissell & Brook, and then followed a colleague in a move to Richmond’s McGuire Woods, where she began doing automotive product liability defense work. Then in 2005 she joined Bowman and Brooke because, she says, “this is *the* trial law firm. For people who want to stand in front of juries and tell stories, there’s no better place.”

She quickly became the head of the firm’s Richmond branch, a diverse office in which half of the partners are women, and she relishes the leadership role—although, she points out, she had no management training before that. “This is not something that women are mentored in,” she says. “I was taught brilliantly how to be a lawyer.

I’m an excellent tactician. But knowing how to be the office general is not something that anybody ever looked at me and thought I would need to know. I had to go out and ask for those skills and acquire them on my own.”

In addition, she took as a role model Harry Pearce, an attorney formerly with General Motors who is now of counsel. She characterizes him as “just as white and male as he could be and a phenomenal, inspirational leader.”

Today Ezell finds herself serving in that capacity for other women lawyers. As she puts it: “One of the reasons I’ve wanted to be here is that I want women to look at me as a role model and say, ‘Wait a second. She’s married and has four kids. She’s a good mom. She’s a trial lawyer, and she’s managing an office. I guess you can do it.’ It’s important for me to be here for others.” **LP**

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