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Few women scale managing partner peak

City's largest law firms have only one female at the top despite increasing numbers of women in profession

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IBJ Photo/Robin Jerstad
 Julia Blackwell Gelinis became managing partner at Locke Reynolds LLP for the first time four years ago.

When partners re-elected Julia Blackwell Gelinis earlier this month to lead Locke Reynolds LLP for a third consecutive two-year stint, she continued her maverick status as the lone female managing partner of a large city law firm.

The 51-year-old Gelinis, who arrived at the city's eighth-largest practice in 1979, a year removed from law school, is in select company. She's one of only a handful of female attorneys in Indianapolis to lay claim to the title, a fact of which leading women in the legal profession are well aware.

"Do we wish there were more women in these roles? Sure," said Ellen Morrison Townsend, chairwoman of the Indianapolis Bar Association's Women in the Law Division. "Indianapolis is a little behind the curve in being the most progressive, but I do think we will catch up as time progresses."

The larger number of women attending law school today compared with 30 years ago supports Townsend's theory. From 1971 to 1997, the most recent year for which figures were available from the American Bar Association, the percentage of women law students more than quadrupled, from 9.4 percent to 44 percent. And the percentage of practicing female lawyers spiked from 13 percent in 1985 to 29 percent last year, according to the ABA.

The numbers from Indiana University's two law schools in Bloomington and Indianapolis mirror the national trend. Women comprised 43 percent of this year's graduating class in Bloomington and 49 percent in Indianapolis.

The feeling from Gelinis and others in the legal community, both male and female, is that more women will ascend to managing partner positions as their numbers increase. The explanations vary as to why more women haven't joined Gelinis, ranging from family

obligations to the glass ceiling.

"Anyone who thinks this is still not a male-dominated profession needs to have a check in reality," said Gelinis, who has juggled her career the past 10 years while raising a son. "But still, it's much different than when I started."

Twenty-five years ago, Gelinis was among those just beginning to blaze a trail for their female peers. She was the first woman lawyer hired by Locke Reynolds and the first to make partner.

The honor of first female managing partner in the city, however, goes to Patricia Polis McCrory, at Harrison & Moberly LLP. She took the reins as a 40-year-old in 1994 and guided the firm for three years. Ten years later, her two small children have made her decision to forgo another stint easier.

"They are probably one of the reasons I have very little interest in returning to the role as managing partner," McCrory said. "In my generation, we were told we could have it all. In all honesty, it is hard to juggle all the demands."

There are a few more women who have joined Gelinis and McCrory in leadership positions. Linda Pence, a partner at Sommer Barnard Ackerson Attorneys PC, was a name partner at the former Johnson Smith Pence Densborn Wright & Heath.

And currently, Lynne D. Lidke at Scopelitis Garvin Light & Hanson PC shares managing partner duties by committee.

Pence, a gritty litigator who in 1999 successfully represented the city in its claim accusing Guide Corp. of causing the White River fish kill, pulled no punches when she said women will continue to face obstacles in any career.

"It's the reluctance at times of men to believe that women have an appropriate place in managing business," she said, "which is sad, because oftentimes I think they can do it better."

The art of compromise and negotiation are high on Pence's list of skills women bring to the table. Gelinis echoed her sentiments, adding that women's natural strengths as managers contribute to a productive atmosphere.

Gelinis had no aspirations to govern Locke Reynolds but put her "hat in the ring" in 2000 after her predecessor wanted to return to practice. There was no feeling at the time among the partners that they needed to elect a female, said Gelinis, who thinks instead that she was the right choice who just happened to be a woman.

Under her guidance, the firm has maintained stability and enjoyed 10-percent annual revenue growth after losing some of its top lawyers when national firm Ogletree Deakins Nash Smoak & Stewart PC came to town. Locke Reynolds grew from 65 to 71 lawyers during the past year.

McCrory, like Gelinis, was content litigating cases when the managing partner at the time tired of the job. Partners elected McCrory on the strength of her undergraduate business

degree. Under her tenure, the firm moved to the more high-profile First Indiana Plaza, invested in new computer equipment and grew to a top-20 practice. The firm now has 27 lawyers.

"Any woman is perfectly capable, and maybe better suited, because women have a good ability to build consensus," McCrory said, "and that is an essential quality in a managing partner."

Alan Levin, who began overseeing the affairs of Barnes & Thornburg seven years ago, chose not to differentiate leadership strengths of men and women, although he admitted some men may not give equal deference to a female managing partner.

A woman leading the state's largest law firm, or one of its outposts, is possible, said Levin. "It's not if," he noted, "but more so when."

That type of thinking is comforting to Gelinas, who has a niece just beginning her law career.

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