

Balancing the scales

Since its founding in 1998, the attorneys at employment boutique Miller Law Group have built up a sterling reputation and a roster of big-ticket clients — but not at the expense of healthy home lives.

By Paul Jones
Daily Journal Staff Writer

One of few boutiques of its time founded on the principles of workplace flexibility, Miller Law Group PC was branded a “mommy track” firm years back for drawing female attorneys who wanted to spend more time with their families. But 17 years on, it’s left that label behind to become one of the preeminent employment law firms in California.

“The ‘mommy’ law firm [label] held us back,” said Kerry Freeman, a shareholder who focuses on discrimination, harassment and retaliation cases. “It took a while to get over that.”

Firm leaders say its culture attracts in equal part fathers and single attorneys looking to balance their work with their lives — and its roster of big clients, including Wells Fargo & Co., United Parcel Service Inc., Marriot International Inc. and AT&T Inc, proves that the firm’s quality of work stands shoulder to shoulder with its peers.

“They are extremely responsive and easy to work with,” said Terry O’Loughlin, general attorney and associate general counsel for AT&T Services Inc. “They have done an outstanding job on all our matters.”

The firm’s success story began with founder Michele Miller, who spent years practicing law at large firms but who found that the opportunities such work afforded her came at a personal cost.

“At the time I had two young kids,” Miller said. “There comes a point when if you don’t leave the office at a certain hour, your kids are asleep. ... You don’t see them. You might as well be on a business trip.”

So in 1998, she left Crosby Heafey Roach & May — a firm that was absorbed by Reed Smith LLP in 2003



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From left: Miller Law Group PC shareholders Lisa C. Hamasaki, Michele Ballard Miller and Walter M. Stella.

— and founded Miller Law Group in Marin County.

“I just decided that you could have a workplace that had flexible hours, and allows people to have lives outside of the office,” Miller said.

Attracting other attorneys was critical to ensuring that the young firm had enough manpower to handle big matters. Fortunately, word got out quickly about the firm’s acceptance of flexible hours.

“The initial attorneys that were interested were women getting into their fifth or sixth year of practice and had young kids,” Miller said. Acquaintances and strangers alike applied to the firm.

Lisa Hamasaki, one of the firm’s shareholders, said she was entering her eighth year with Reed Smith when she decided to join Miller in 2006. But her interest was less about improving her work-life balance and more the advantages offered by the specialty-shop law firm model.

“The critical mass of lawyers at Miller with real depth of information [about] California employment law” was bigger than at Reed Smith,

Hamasaki said. “That was a huge draw for me.”

Attorneys at Miller don’t rack up points for origination, and they often pitch in on different cases, increasing the amount of attention clients’ various employment-law matters get. The approach appears to appeal to clients and attorneys.

The firm really began growing in the early 2000s. After moving to Marin for lower overhead costs, Miller said she had enough business to enable a move to San Francisco when rents dropped during the 2008 recession.

Miller Law Group’s profile was also on the rise. Its attorneys handled a heavily publicized pregnancy discrimination case for LucasFilm Limited LLC, attended legal events as panelists, and won the firm recognition from industry publications for its growth and expertise.

In addition to drawing talented attorneys, the firm’s emphasis on flexibility gave it an advantage over larger firms, which began facing their own problems as the recession hit their business. Miller Law Group attracted

clients because of its willingness to customize its approach to cases to fit companies’ needs.

The firm “is a great partner for in-house employment lawyers like me who need responsive, reliable, practical employment law advice” said Mary Hansbury, director and assistant general counsel for employment and litigation at software developer VMware Inc. Miller Law Group’s attorneys “formulate business-savvy strategies” to resolve cases, she said.

Lynn Bersch, assistant general counsel of global employment law for electronics manufacturer KLA-Tencor Corp., also praised Miller Law Group for its efficiency.

The firm provides “big firm experience at reasonable rates,” Bersch said. “[We] have never had to worry about overstaffing of cases.”

In 2012, the firm added its first male shareholder, Walter Stella, a former partner with Bingham McCutchen LLP, which lost most of its attorneys to Morgan Lewis in 2014.

“They’d really brought together a group of outstanding lawyers,” said Stella, who handles all aspects of employment law. “I found myself being attracted to it — I felt I could serve clients and have an opportunity to expand my practice, but be really an impact player at the firm.”

Looking back over the years, Miller said she feels she and her partners were ahead of the curve and proved the value of their concept. The firm is still growing, and expanded into Los Angeles in 2012.

“I think we might have been, in 1998, a very new model,” Miller said. “The ups and downs of small firm practice isn’t for everyone — you need to have a strong stomach, and a real optimistic view of the world.”

“I do feel ‘mission accomplished.’” She said. “Most small businesses fail after five years.”