

THE **road** TO *INDEPENDENCE*



101
women's
journeys
to starting
their own
law firms

- MICHELE BALLARD MILLER -

“The accepted mantra of the time was that you could not be a part-time litigator. Nor could you represent business in anything but a large, multi-office firm. . . . I rejected the wisdom of the times. I have never looked back.”

The Woman Advantage

We all remember how hard we had to work to earn our law degrees, wherever we went to law school. And then there were the long, sometimes thankless, hours as associate attorneys on the partnership track, honing our craft and earning valuable experience. But at some point along the way, many women lawyers come to a crossroads marked by the desire to start and care for a family and the drive to have a thriving law practice and professional career. Is it really possible to start and care for a family, without getting derailed from the practice of law or marginalized within a firm’s ranks?

In the firms at which I practiced, as at most law firms even today, management was dominated by men, along with old-fashioned views of family and work. Firm goals were and often still are focused on money—hours billed, revenue generated, and what work an attorney can bring in. You had to dedicate yourself to putting in the hours. And if you were a woman, chances are you were told (or it otherwise became clear) that you had to make a choice between working as a professional and being a mom. You certainly would not make partner if you did not sacrifice family life for the long hours. Many women lawyers believe they have to make this choice, and withdraw from the profession, sometimes for 10 to 20 years, and then find it difficult to return to the practice of law after so much time.

After 15 years as an associate and then as a partner at large, national law firms, I came to the career/family crossroads. I had two young children and little time to enjoy them. And, while I adored my children, I also enjoyed my

career. I thought long and hard about which path to take. I did not want to leave the practice of law, but I was not interested in the mommy track.

To further complicate matters, my specialty was representing business in employment law and related litigation. The accepted mantra of the time was that you could not be a part-time litigator. Nor could you represent business in anything but a large, multi-office firm. I was told in no uncertain terms that I would be crazy to start my own firm. Colleagues predicted I would be seduced by the dark side and end up representing plaintiffs. I was also told that I should simply accept fate, becoming one of the numerous women who left large firms to see their practice shrink to only employment counseling and advice. Litigation was simply not an option, so I was told.

I rejected the wisdom of the times, believing that one could litigate and still maintain some balance. Granted, there would be days when court-imposed deadlines would dictate long hours, even into the early morning hours. However, there would also be days when the press of work was not extreme, and I could enjoy my family and friends. I took the plunge, forming my own firm. I have never looked back.

My decision was driven not only by the twin goals of creating a work/life balance for myself and my colleagues and creating and building a successful practice that emphasized the strengths and values of women. In addition, I was determined that a focus on these core goals would give me an advantage—what I call the “Woman Advantage” in building a business.

The Woman Advantage is the opportunity to create and build a firm culture and environment that emphasizes the strengths and values of women. The Woman Advantage is a culture that encourages collaboration and teamwork, open and trusting communication. It is a vision that takes a longer-term perspective, providing superior service to clients while managing reasonable and sustainable financial goals and objectives. All of these qualities are, of course, important for most businesses—but as women we are, in particular, drawn to a culture that provides a balance of financial, professional, and family objectives. Successful companies are adept at balancing short- and long-term objectives; women are all about balance, and this is our advantage.

In retrospect, the decision to start my own firm was one of the most important decisions in my life. Now, more than 12 years later, my women share-

holders and I have a thriving and financially successful law practice that emphasizes quality legal work and offers lawyers—women and men—a work/life equilibrium. My oldest is heading off to college, and I am proud to have raised a confident young woman while never losing focus on my career. And in the last four years, my firm has had a compounded growth rate of over 40 percent. The Woman Advantage means we can have it all.

The keys to a law firm's success and individual financial benefit are basic: The firm must attract and retain good people, and the firm must keep its clients happy. We have succeeded at both.

Our firm's environment and culture founded on women's values help us to attract and retain the best and the brightest, women and men. Our attorneys come from some of the largest national law firms and the most prestigious law schools in the United States, excited about the unique opportunity to do high-level legal work for interesting companies at competitive salaries, without sacrificing personal opportunities. Our attorneys can take the time to coach their kids' soccer teams (as I did for over 10 years), a few hours here and there to volunteer in the classroom, or even extended family trips over the summer. And it's not unusual to see kids in the office; in fact, they are welcome. We have a bright and fun kids room for use when mom or dad needs to finish up a brief or attend a client meeting, but the children have time off from school or maybe have a runny nose and the parent wants to keep them close by.

Keeping clients happy has to be the number one goal of any professional firm. At Miller Law Group we take a woman-based approach to our work and client relations, emphasizing understanding, collaboration, communication, and balance. We make the extra effort to understand our clients' needs and their goals and objectives before taking on a case, whether the client is a small start-up, a mid-size business, or a Fortune 500 company. We work with our clients early in the litigation process to resolve cases in a timely and efficient manner. We are good communicators, which means we write effective summary judgment motions and get cases dismissed. We collaborate with each other, relying on the strengths that each lawyer can bring to a case or legal issue. The end result is happy clients, leading to long-term client relationships, and professional and financial success for our lawyers.

Women do not have to make the choice between a legal career or a family that so many firms force them into. Attorneys at our firm are able to have it all: a family/personal life, a thriving legal career, and financial rewards.

MICHELE BALLARD MILLER is president and shareholder of Miller Law Group in San Francisco, California, where she focuses on employment law and related litigation. She graduated from law school in 1982 and founded her firm in 1998. www.millerlawgroup.com