

# Firms change practices to keep female lawyers

By Jason Cato

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Alexandra West graduated first in her class from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, signed up to clerk for a federal judge and planned to join one of the city's largest law firms.

Then she became pregnant, dashing her hopes to join a big firm but not her ambition to be a lawyer.

Instead, she took a part-time job with a boutique firm, Manion McDonough & Lucas, which allows her to practice law and be a full-time mother. West can drop off and pick up her son, now 8, from school each day.

"I feel like I get to have my cake and eat it, too," said West, 42, of Highland Park. "For me to have this time with him, I wouldn't trade it for anything. But at the same time, I get to use my mind and skills and utilize what I trained to do."

Law firms increasingly are developing programs that allow employees to work more flexible hours and to telecommute, in an effort to reduce the number of women leaving the legal field. Men and women for two decades have graduated from law schools in equal numbers, but more than 40 percent of women leave the profession by mid-career, according to American Bar Association statistics.

"The profession cannot afford to operate without half of the intellectual brain power," said Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of consulting firm Flex-Time Lawyers, based in Philadelphia.

Motherhood certainly factors into why some women stop being lawyers, but Henry said female lawyers leave for other reasons, such as pay or because more of the interesting cases are doled out to men. Others have to deal with sick parents or spouses.

"We have to re-jigger how law firms are structured so work-life is no longer just a mommy issue," Henry said.

Women make up 30 percent of lawyers in the United States, but just 18 percent of law partners, the bar association reported last year. In Pittsburgh, women make up about 22 percent of all attorneys but only about 15 percent of law partners, according to the Allegheny County Bar Association.

After a 2005 survey showed little changed during 15 years in terms of gender issues in Pittsburgh's legal community, the county bar association's Gender Equality Task Force and Women in Law Division worked to address issues facing female lawyers, said Linda Hernandez, the gender equality coordinator for the bar association, who graduated from Duquesne law school at age 45 and has two daughters who are attorneys.

"I can't help but think things can be different for them," said Hernandez, a lawyer with Dickie McCamey & Chilcote, Downtown.

In 2007, three Pittsburgh-based law firms and two others with offices in the city were named among the 50 Best Law Firms for Women by Working Mother Magazine in conjunction with Flex-Time Lawyers. Among those was K&L Gates.

That Downtown firm offers a balanced-hour program designed to give employees flexibility in their schedules so they can better balance their careers and home lives. The firm offers a program designed to help lawyers who leave the firm stay connected by inviting them to social and professional events, paying to keep their bar dues current and encouraging them to attend continuing legal education classes.

"It's not a mystery that when you lose anyone in the practice, it's a big loss to clients and the firm," said Roslyn "Roz" Pitts, a lawyer who heads the firm's recruitment and professional development efforts.

In order for law culture to truly change, Hernandez said decision-makers at law firms must work with women lawyers and law students.

"When each has more information to make decisions, then more change will occur," Hernandez said.

Henry developed a "cheat sheet" for women lawyers and law students to use when deciding where to work. Key criteria to consider, she said, are the percentage of women lawyers, women partners and women in leadership positions on the firm's committees as well as business development, schedule flexibility and mentoring opportunities.

"It's been hard to break through that old-boys' network," Henry said.

West said the only information she received at law school concerning flexible scheduling and nontraditional career paths was that those options existed only for women who put in their time, built solid business for the firm and made partner.

Though larger firms were less inclined to accommodate her work-life needs as an inexperienced associate, West fielded several good offers from smaller firms.

"I was pleasantly surprised to find there are a number of employers out there who were willing to do something different," she said. "And I think that's important. It's important from the family perspective. But it's also important from the firm's perspective, because they're going to miss some quality people. It was a deciding factor in where I was going to work."

*Jason Cato can be reached at [jcato@tribweb.com](mailto:jcato@tribweb.com) or 412-320-7840.*