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Woman-owned firm comes in

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In the parade of out-of-town law firms opening Chicago offices, Schoeman, Updike & Kaufman LLP, which opened here last week with new partner Stephanie A. Scharf, is different.

"We're a woman-owned firm," said partner Beth L. Kaufman, "but I think we're the only woman-owned firm with offices in two major cities."

A New York firm with three names in its title, the firm will do business in Chicago with four names, Schoeman, Updike, Kaufman & Scharf.

Its new office is at 333 W. Wacker Drive, suite 300.

Scharf is a former partner at Jenner & Block LLP who co-chaired that firm's product liability and mass tort practice.

She is also former president of the National Association of Women Lawyers.

Scharf said she switched to the new place because "the idea of working in a smaller, more flexible work environment has some appeal, with more flexible fee arrangements."

Also, "Every once in a while, people need change in their lives, and this seemed like a good change to me."

Schoeman, Updike is a 19-lawyer boutique. It represents corporate clients in litigation and transactional matters, and in Chicago will focus on litigation.

The firm says it is strong in complex commercial litigation, product liability defense, toxic tort defense and insurance coverage for policy holders.

It hopes to expand in Chicago into real estate, business law, and trusts and estates.

The majority of the firm's lawyers, 10 out of 19, are men. Kaufman said it is certified woman-owned because "the

majority of the equity ownership in the firm is women."

The firm is also different because it puts an emphasis on alternative fee arrangements, and Kaufman and Scharf say the firm welcomes "flex time lawyers."

"We know a lot of lawyers have trouble over many years working in large law firms because of the high hours demand," Kaufman said. "We welcome lawyers who are interested in flex-time, project-based work."

According to Scharf, "This can be an environment where women can succeed."

Scharf said she has two children and that she and Kaufman "both feel strongly there should be a place for family, too. It's not all about work."

"I'm the mother of three children," Kaufman said. "I had them all at this firm."

As for flexible fees, the firm is open to flat fee engagements, or to engagements with a reduced fee plus bonus for results.

The firm was founded in 1969 by two men, one being Michael E. Schoeman. Charles B. Updike joined the firm in 1976.

Kaufman said she was the firm's first female associate in 1978.

"I think men in the firm dating back to when I came were very supportive of women's achievement and advancement," Kaufman said.

The female ownership "just evolved" and the lawyers realized the firm had become women-owned in 2004, Kaufman explained.

Scharf is joined in the new Chicago office by Marilyn J. Chimes, a former Jenner associate, who is counsel.