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Women-owned law firm receives honors

By John Flynn Rooney
Law Bulletin staff writer

A law firm opened in New York in 1969 by two men, which now has a Chicago office, considers itself the largest women-owned law firm in the nation.

The law firm of Schoeman, Updike & Kaufman LLP was recently honored at the Transformative Leadership Awards dinner in Chicago. About a dozen women lawyers were recognized at the event hosted by Inside Counsel magazine for having assisted other females in moving into leadership positions in the legal community.

Partner Beth L. Kaufman accepted the award on the firm's behalf. She became the firm's first female associate in 1978.

"Many women followed me (and they) worked very hard," Kaufman said. "The men gave the same opportunities to women as they did to male lawyers and the women were very successful."

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

The now 27-lawyer firm opened a Chicago office in 2007 and does business here with four names, Schoeman, Updike, Kaufman & Scharf. The firm's roster of lawyers consists of about half men and half women but all the equity is owned by women lawyers.

"We believe that we are the largest women-owned law firm in the country," Stephanie A. Scharf said.

Scharf left Jenner & Block LLP to open Schoeman, Updike's Chicago office, which now comprises nine lawyers, six of whom are women. Scharf and Sarah R. Marmor are the partners working in the Chicago office.

"We think the women being encouraged and mentored by the men lawyers is important," Scharf said. "And we also think we attract and retain women who have an entrepreneurial spirit, which has helped women succeed in the firm."

Jane DiRenzo Pigott, managing director of R3 Group LLC, a Chicago consulting firm focusing on diversity and inclusion, said she has recently seen more women-owned law firms both locally and nationally. Pigott believes more women are assuming financial control of law firms for economic reasons.

One factor driving the trend "is the

emphasis by large law firms on financial measurements like profits per partner and per lawyer revenue because those impact on the culture of a firm," Pigott said. "Given (these) economic times, clients are very price-sensitive, and by leaving large law firms you have an opportunity to provide the same quality of service for lower hourly billable rates."

The Women's Business Enterprise National Council has certified the Schoeman, Updike firm as a women-owned entity, Kaufman said. The firm is believed to be the only women-owned firm with offices in New York and Chicago, she said.

The Schoeman, Updike firm is a member of the National Association of Minority & Women Owned Law Firms.

The firm represents clients in litigation and transaction matters both in Chicago and New York.

Both Kaufman and Scharf have assumed leadership roles in bar groups.

Scharf currently serves as president of the National Association of Women Lawyers Foundation and is a former president of the National Association of Women Lawyers.

Kaufman is the incoming vice-president of the National Association of Women Lawyers.



Stephanie A. Scharf