

# A Seat at the Table

Columbus and Cleveland firms are working to level the playing field for women BY JENNY BURMAN

Thirty-eight years ago, when Joyce Edelman was starting out as a lawyer, there were fewer female role models in the industry. For women, it could be sink or swim.

"I swam," says Edelman. "I have had mentors over the years, but I sometimes had to initiate that process."

Now a partner and chair of the life science practice group at Porter Wright Morris & Arthur in Columbus, Edelman heads her firm's Women's Leadership Initiative and is on the steering committee of an innovative advocacy group called Gender Equity in the Legal Industry, or GELI (pronounced "jelly").

"Historically, women in the profession have had to work much, much harder to prove their worth," says Edelman. "And prove that they deserve to have a voice and a seat at the table."

Several other Columbus firms are also involved in GELI, including Barnes & Thornburg, where the program was launched in 2016 by managing partner William Nolan and office administrator Kelly Atkinson. Borrowing the "Gender By Us" discussion-topic toolkit of the Women's Fund of Central Ohio, they planned an event focused on identifying workplace bias. It attracted more than 60 people;

what emerged was a program that brought a group of normally competitive firms together for a conversation.

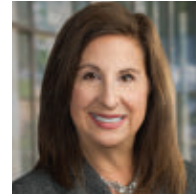
"If I can borrow an idea from another firm and make our firm better in this area, that's OK," Nolan says. "One of the successes of GELI has been getting managing partners of five participating firms to the events. When three of them show up, then a fourth one feels like they should show up, and a fifth one. ... You just keep doing it, and you create a little peer pressure."

The group's second discussion was hosted jointly with BakerHostetler, whose representatives included partner Jennifer E. Edwards. Next to join the effort was Porter Wright Morris & Arthur, followed in 2017 by Bricker & Eckler and Vorys, Sater, Seymour and Pease. In pre-pandemic times, the firms rotated as hosts, but over the summer, GELI's planning committee met to discuss taking the group's next meeting online, with speakers but less discussion. And, in the wake of last year's killing of George Floyd, Porter Wright planned to spearhead a November GELI Zoom-lecture event discussing the intersectionality of race and gender, with a focus on Black women lawyers.

Before COVID-19 came along, the conversation featured nine well-attended events, which included breakouts to get people talking about successes, failures and ideas for improvement. One session debated billable hours as a standard for evaluation.

"If a firm does not have some flexibility in how it advances people, how it accommodates life changes, that tends to affect women more than men," says Nolan.

Marie-Joëlle Khouzam, a partner at Bricker & Eckler's Columbus office, says many female lawyers feel they have to choose between family and career advancement. "Sometimes [these women] don't leave law," she says, "but they leave firms." Some go to work for government or as in-house counsel, jobs with more



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Bricker & Eckler; Employment & Labor; Employer; Columbus

predictable schedules and fewer business-development demands.

Her firm has taken a closer look at the criteria for becoming a partner. Khouzam shares the example of Bricker & Eckler colleague Catherine Swartz: "[She] became a partner following a different path than most lawyers." A mother of four, Swartz negotiated a reduced work schedule in 2013, and was not bumped off the partner track. Her expertise and client relationships provided enough value without the "formulaic path to partnership."

It's not just women who are showing up at GELI meetings. Men have made up more than half the participants at some events. At one happy hour, which drew more than 125 lawyers, the topic was "How can men be better allies?"

After all, as firms become open to creative arrangements, male lawyers can benefit, too. "I have one colleague who initially took a couple of weeks as a block of time when his wife had a baby," says Khouzam. "Then he took every Friday for the balance of a year. ... [Parental leave] became one of the topics for GELI."

Thinking back to when her firm's Women's Leadership Initiative began, Edelman says, "Five years ago, I would not have imagined the type of support we have now. When I look back to 2014 ... and the data about why women's initiatives fail in law firms, the failure rate was high. And the theme throughout was that men were not involved. I have tried to change that dynamic at Porter Wright, and I think our GELI group does as well."

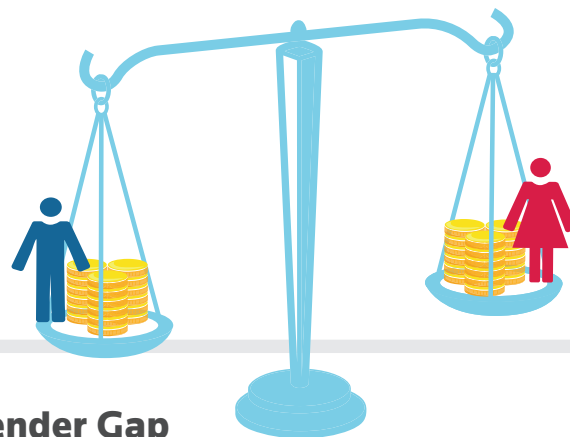


A spinoff branch of GELI has also started in Cleveland, with nine firms involved by summer's end.

Several firms involved in GELI also participate in Diversity Lab's Mansfield Rule program, launched in 2017 with the aim of boosting diversity in law firm leadership by broadening the pool of candidates. To be Mansfield-certified, at least 30% of a firm's leadership candidates must be made up of women or minorities—including LGBTQ lawyers and those with disabilities.

Khouzam says programs like GELI and Mansfield can benefit the entire legal market. "The beauty of doing this in collaboration with other firms is hearing what other people are doing successfully or unsuccessfully," she says. "And to really focus on doing what's right for women in the community at large, so that Columbus can be viewed as a very welcoming place for women lawyers—you know, not necessarily a place where you have to choose between family and career.

"A rising tide lifts all boats." 



## The Gender Gap

In 2018, according to an ABA report, women lawyers pulled in salaries that were just 80% of their male counterparts. Khouzam points out that a compounding effect makes the gap even wider as time goes by: A 3% raise on a smaller salary means even less, cumulatively, in the next round. The ABA report goes on to cite Acritas Research on the 2018 gap for female equity partners, whose compensation globally was 27% less than males. And when it comes to promotion to partnership, McKinsey & Co. reports that 141 men are promoted to partner for every 100 women.

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