

# WASHINGTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

## Advocates for change

WHY WE NEED MORE LADIES LIKE THESE AS THE LAW PROFESSION'S NEW DEANS



Lizzie Baird, left, and Grace Speights say their leadership styles are similar, down to having fun and responding to email. "The two of us are not stuffy at all," Speights said.

SARA GILGORE  
Washington Business Journal

A high-profile corporate marriage brought Lizzie Baird and Grace Speights together.

With the combination of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP and Bingham McCutchen LLP in 2014, Baird and Speights joined forces as co-managing partners of the resulting firm's D.C. office. That's made Morgan Lewis, at No. 5 on this year's List, the largest local legal outpost to be led entirely by female captains. And for this duo, that's no small feat. They run the largest of Morgan Lewis' offices, at 603 local employees, including 343 lawyers.

Baird had come from Bingham,

and Speights had been with Morgan Lewis for more than three decades. Their shared values, they say, allowed them to create an environment that supports inclusion – which, they say, is critical to advancing more females in leadership roles in the industry.

They say they come from a time when law firms faced pressure to slot females in high-ranking roles just to hit numbers. Today, they said, it's different. When young female attorneys can see clearer paths to leadership, it feeds their success. When they gain and maintain client confidence, it proves they deserve the responsibility. When they get exposure to major cases, they mature and gain self-confidence.

When they have the technology to work remotely, they can better juggle home and office.

Baird and Speights agree the industry must do more to develop more female prospects into successful partners. When firms set the right tone for women as well as men to succeed, leadership will grow. There is still a long way to go, they say, but they are optimistic for diversity to rise.

We talked with Speights and Baird about their challenges, both past and present, and where they see women heading among law's highest ranks.

*A conversation with Lizzie Baird and Grace Speights*

**What are some of the biggest changes you've seen with respect to women in leadership roles?**

**Speights:** Oh, big changes. When I joined the firm, I guess, 32 years ago, there were not any women in leadership. You could count the number of women partners on one hand – and I don't think it would fill the entire hand. If you look at us now, we have a woman who's chair of our firm. I believe she's chair of the largest firm of any firms that have a woman chair. I think over a third of our office managing partners are women. We have quite a few women who head up our practice groups. We have women on our advisory board. We have women on our partner compensation committee. We have women in terms of our high-level administrative staff – our chief administrative officer is a

## ▶ CLOSE UP

**LIZZIE BAIRD**

Co-managing partner, Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP

**Age:** 57

**Education:** Bachelor's in economics, Brown University; J.D., Georgetown University Law Center

**Residence:** McLean

**Family:** Two sons, 23 and 20; two yellow labs

**Practice area:** Securities enforcement

**Previously:** Partner, Bingham McCutchen LLP

**Career beginnings:** Bond trader on Wall Street for 10 years before going to law school

**First job:** Marketing with New England Financial Group



Lizzie Baird, left, and Grace Speights said they plan to boost Morgan Lewis' local presence. "We're going to infiltrate the Washington market," Speights said.

## ▶ CLOSE UP

**GRACE SPEIGHTS**

Co-managing partner, Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP

**Age:** 59

**Education:** Bachelor's in political science, University of Pennsylvania; J.D., George Washington University Law School

**Residence:** Friendship Heights

**Family:** Two children, 29 and 27

**Practice area:** Labor and employment law

**Previously:** Senior partner, Morgan Lewis

**Career beginnings:** Summer associate with Morgan Lewis in 1981

**First job:** Clerk in a drapery and curtain store

woman. It's changed tremendously.

**Baird:** It struck me when you used the term "leadership role." There was a time when it was just a role. And now it's real leadership. So when it's a woman who is a practice

group leader, it's typically because she has the biggest practice, and because the clients are turning to her for the most serious advice, the most serious problems they have, and for the cases where it's bet-the-company type work. So it's not just someone in a "role," it's someone who really is a leader.

**How has that changed?**

**Baird:** I remember years ago when the women in roles were sort of there, so that there'd be a woman in the room. But now the women are really the leaders, or certainly, they're co-leaders along with the men.

**Speights:** I think about Jami McKeon. Before she became chair of the entire firm, Jami was head of our litigation group, which at that time was our largest practice group. For a woman to head a litigation practice – those are people who are deep in the trenches, in the courtrooms, in front of the judges, in front of the juries, bet-the-company cases. We have a woman partner who leads our energy practice group, our food and drug practice group. Nobody thinks it's strange or different. It's like a way of life, at least for us now.

**What are the biggest factors contributing to these changes?**

**Speights:** Being successful at a law firm like this – in addition to being a good practitioner and being respected by your colleagues – is being able to develop business. So making sure that women have the opportunity to go out on pitches, they're put out in front on major cases, they're given leadership opportunities – and I don't mean handed out just because they're a woman – and asked to be heads of practice groups and on the compensation committee. When younger people look up and see there is a path at a firm for women to be successful – and for us, and we're very proud of it, at the top of the firm – it makes a big difference. We didn't have that, 30-something years ago when I started: I looked up and it was all white men.

**Baird:** And gaining client confidence. You can't fake it, because the clients will walk away. They want people who understand their problems, they want people who understand the law, they want people who have solutions. And if you just put people up there, and they're

not the people who have the answers for them, who are going to do the work for them, they're going to walk away.

**Where else have you seen that kind of change?**

**Speights:** If you look at the Fortune 50, 100, 500, there are a lot more women general counsels now. And in that arena, some companies have done a lot better than the law firms. You will hear from a woman general counsel or assistant general counsel, "When you come out and do a pitch for me, I don't want to see a bunch of white guys sitting on the other side." So that has made a big difference. Our clients are diverse, internally, and more and more of our clients have women at the top. So that requires that we take it seriously, too.

**Interesting, what else?**

**Speights:** Technology has helped women. The fact that you don't have to be in the office all the time. And I know there are dads who contribute to households and take care of kids, too, but traditionally, most of that has fallen to women. And at least when I was coming along, it was very difficult to do that, because you're trying to have a full-time practice, you want to be successful, you've got young kids. While this [smartphone] can sometimes be a pain in the you-know-what because it makes you 24/7, it really has, I think, allowed for a lot more flexibility. I can leave early. I can go away with my family. This is going with me, but it allows me to do that. And coming along, we didn't have this.

**Baird:** A lot of women go home early, they make dinner for their kids, they bathe their kids, they put them to bed and they jump back online. And the better we get with technology so that they can seamlessly work on documents, seamlessly participate in video conferences with clients from home – the clients don't even know if they're at home or in the office – they don't

feel like they're missing anything.

**What will it take for more change to happen?**

**Speights:** Programs like what are called on-ramping and off-ramping help. We partner with, for example, one of our largest clients, JP Morgan Chase, in their "Legal Re-entry Program." That is focused on women who have been at home for a while taking care of family needs, and it's a way for them to get back in the legal market. We partner with them, they spend some time with us, they spend time at Chase, and at the end of that program, they get an offer to come full-time at Chase.

**Baird:** The average was six years that they had taken off of work. Most of them had stayed home to raise children. But some of them will do it with elderly parents.

**How often do you come across situations like this?**

**Baird:** This was an issue several years ago with summer associates: What happens if you want to take time off to have kids? And I remember some of the partners – this was at another firm I was at – saying, "Well, the clients aren't waiting for you. So we can't wait for you. What are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to save your office indefinitely? We've got young people coming up, and their skills are fresher." So women didn't know what to do. This was probably about 10 years ago.

**Speights:** Women left the workplace and stayed home for a while, and there was a big gap in their resumes. Even if they wanted to, it's very hard to come back. I think we've come a long way in realizing that, at least at the law firms, one track doesn't fit everyone – whether you're male, female, whatever. I think it was the rigidity that was the problem. You're here, you make partner after eight, nine years, if you take time off, you've taken yourself out of consideration. Well no, you haven't, you haven't taken yourself out of consideration. It

may take a little longer because you got to come back and get back in the groove, but you haven't taken yourself out of the whole process.

**What do you tell young women in the profession?**

**Baird:** One of the things I counsel them is, develop a specialty – within your practice area, even something very arcane that not everybody needs all the time. Really become an expert. Know it inside and out, speak in that area, write in that area. And then even if you're away for some time, you can come back because you have this area. There are going to be a bunch of clients, they're going to periodically need an expert in that area. So it's a little bit of a different strategy, but it creates a bit of a career path for you.

**What are we still missing in D.C. in terms of female leadership?**

**Speights:** We still have a long way to go, obviously. If you look at the number of women graduating from law school who come in as associates at these firms – at least at our firm – most of the time our classes are more than 50 percent women. But then when you look at the number of women in partnership, it's a lot less. We're proud that we are above the national average. But if you've got more than 50 percent women coming in and there's still a gap, there's still something that's wrong. Women do not leave law firms because they don't want to work hard. That's not the issue. Women have to see that there is a path there for them to develop businesses, and to become leaders in that firm.

**What more can firms do to change that?**

**Speights:** We've got to be more focused on mentoring and sponsorships of women. A lot of times, the guy-mentoring and sponsorship happens a little more naturally. So because of that we have to pay more attention to mentoring and sponsoring our women – making sure they get the opportunities to

get in front of clients, they get the cases where they're going to travel because those tend to be the high-profile ones. If you get to travel on a big case, interview witnesses, take depositions, that's a career-maker as opposed to just sitting in the office and looking at some documents. Firms have to make sure they're putting in programs to ensure that.

#### **What has Morgan Lewis done to that end?**

**Speights:** We last year launched a program called "ML Women," and it's geared primarily at our women partners, teaching and training on skills of business development. Because if you've got the business, you can be successful at one of these places. And doing things such that our clients get exposed to our women partners, especially our younger women partners, who are just getting into the partnership and need to develop.

**Baird:** And in some ways, we're a little bit victims of our own success. If companies out there are looking for talented women to bring in as general counsels, as assistant general counsels, where would you go look? I'd go look at Morgan Lewis. In the past two weeks, we lost two great women partners to two client companies. To lose a couple in a couple weeks is a big deal. You don't just manufacture women partners. Women partners don't grow on trees. You're constantly trying to develop young people, and it's a process.

#### **How much of this is on the law firm?**

**Speights:** You've got to focus on it. It really is a concerted effort, it has to be by a law firm if they really want their women to be successful.

**Baird:** There was a time when there was a lot of pressure on law firms because their numbers weren't there. All of a sudden, there would be this class of women partners, and everybody knew those women weren't ready. It was sort of

like an open secret within the firm – and I'm not talking about Morgan Lewis, I was at another firm at the time that I witnessed it: Those weren't women who could lead cases, and those weren't women who could take charge of things. It was not their fault, it was just the firms were trying to look like they were keeping up. And you can't do that.

#### **So then what happens when that happens?**

**Baird:** It's a terrible position to put those women in. You're doing them no service, and you're doing no service to the women coming up, because you're not giving them mentors. You're scaring them to death. It's a process, and you've got to stay on top of it all the time. You want to send a signal to women coming up, as they're getting more senior: If they're doing a great job, you want them to stick around and you want to keep developing them. Again, they could be plucked away by clients, so you're in constant development.

#### **How will we know when we've seen success?**

**Speights:** I do think having our women plucked away by our clients means we're doing something right. But I think you know you're successful when the environment in the firm – and this may sound hokey – is inclusive. I don't care about the numbers. Eventually, the numbers will get there if you set the right tone and environment in the firm. So you have to have an environment where women – and I also put diverse lawyers in that category too, since I happen to be in both of those categories – know that I am at a place where regardless of my color, regardless of my gender, if I'm a good lawyer, I work my tail off, my clients love me, my clients are asking me to take on another case after I just won or sometimes even lost another case depending on how I handled it – there is space for me here. The firm will invest in me, the firm will train me, and I can be pro-

moted at this firm. If you can have that kind of environment, where I think I can get a fair shake regardless of my color or my gender, the numbers will grow. They will grow.

#### **What does this environment look like?**

**Baird:** A partner of mine, who is also a former Bingham person, came to me, and he said, "I really want to make so-and-so a partner, and it happens to be a woman." And I said, "Great, sit down, let's talk about it." And he went through the reasons. They were all economically driven. They were each a point about how she had expanded the client relationships. Not one of the points he made had anything to do with gender. So to me, that was just a home run. The reasons he was giving were all the reasons you would hear if a guy was up for partner.

#### **Where do you think law firm leadership is headed overall?**

**Speights:** It will definitely be more diverse. That's just the way of the world. The whole idea of globalization, the fact that our clients are diverse, they're serving diverse populations, diverse customers. So when you have clients pushing you in that direction, you either jump on board or you're not going to exist anymore.

#### **Where are you seeing that now?**

**Speights:** This may sound a little sentimental, but I just think our younger people – I look at my own kids and their friends – they, for the most part, don't see color and gender. Eventually, our law firm's leadership has to look like that. It just has to. Slow, but it will get there. I'm pretty confident about that.

**Baird:** Well especially in our area, the high schools are so diverse. That's just normal to them. My sons were raised by women and would not stand for a woman being told she couldn't do something, or a woman being treated any differently. They would think that was the oddest thing in the world.