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Industry Icon: Morgan Lewis' first female chair, Jami Wintz McKeon, sleeps four hours a night

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When Jami Wintz McKeon rose to the top of Philadelphia's biggest law firm, there was one person surprised by her ascension: Jami Wintz McKeon.

Named chair of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP in 2013, McKeon became the first woman to oversee the firm's legal empire that has grown to include 2,200 attorneys in 30 offices scattered across North America, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

"It was a fairly significant departure for any large firm, especially one with a reputation as old line and conservative," said McKeon. "I never envisioned doing this. It's fair to say I was surprised."

But McKeon was the obvious choice, said Grace Speights, head of the labor and employment practice at Morgan Lewis.

"She's an ideal boss, and I think people were unanimous about that feeling across the firm," Speights said. "Jami has the legal and financial acumen, but she is unique in terms of her people skills. Talk to anyone in the firm from associates to someone in the mailroom and they'll tell you they are amazed that she knows them and cares about them."

McKeon, 59, joined Morgan Lewis 36 years ago right out of Villanova's law school.

"I've had the world's most boring career," she quips. "I was very



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Jami Wintz McKeon is chair of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, leading a law firm of 2,200 attorneys around the world.

lucky to be given a lot of great opportunities and I never said no to any of them."

In the courtroom, being a woman — especially early in her career — had its challenges. She turned them to her favor.

"Because they didn't think of me as a serious adversary, I could take advantage of their ignorance," she said. "When I was offended, I used it as fuel to make sure they learned the error of their ways."

An opposing counsel once wrote a letter to a partner accusing McKeon of being "hysterical" — and copied her.

"I wrote him back saying, 'I just wanted to make sure you saw what someone has sent out over your signature, because I'd be sure you'd be mortified to see it,'" McKeon said.

"He owned up to being a jerk and

we became friends."

Though McKeon's life has been graced by serendipity and an ability to forge personal connections, she also possesses what many would consider rare powers.

She gets by on four hours of sleep, allowing her to cram two full workdays into one. "In my 30s, it wasn't uncommon for me to pull all-nighters," she said.

She also has a "ridiculous memory" for names and phone numbers that helps cement alliances. "It's the way my synapses work. I don't forget," she said. "My father has it, too. It's a very convenient thing to have, but nothing I take credit for."

And through her rise at Morgan Lewis, McKeon has achieved a balance between her work and home lives. When the job hasn't required

her to be in another city, or on another continent, she makes every attempt to be home for dinner while rearing four children. That's not a special power, she said. "I've been blessed to have great child care."

McKeon's day begins at 5 a.m. when her husband, John Hollway, the author and executive director of the Quattrone Center for the Fair Administration of Justice at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, brings her black coffee — Corsica blend from La Colombe. She catches up on email from around the globe, reads an array of newspapers and legal publications and then checks Google alerts set up for all her key clients.

She sees off her two younger kids, a junior and a senior in high school. Then at 7 a.m. McKeon launches a round of conference calls with Morgan Lewis attorneys in Europe and Asia.

She drives to the office. "My one regret is I don't take the train," she said. During the commute, she's working the phone. At Morgan Lewis HQ at 17th and Market Streets, her long day is packed with meetings and firm matters.

"I do my best to be home for dinner, which is usually 7:30 or 8 p.m. given everybody's schedules," she said.

Then the second half of her day begins. She works through midnight, usually calling it at day at 1 a.m. when she checks the coffee maker to be certain it's programmed to brew before she wakes.

McKeon grew up in Morristown in North Jersey. At 17, she headed to Penn State to major in political science with an emphasis on the Soviet bloc, "which became somewhat irrelevant" with the collapse of the U.S.S.R.

"My best education was from things outside the classroom," she said. As head of the student activities budget committee at Penn State, she oversaw the disbursement of \$9 million a year,

learning about decision-making and setting priorities.

After four years in Happy Valley, she wanted to be closer to the city. She chose Villanova Law, where she put aside her extracurricular interests. "I was one of the strange people who really loved law school," she said.

She interviewed with only four law firms. The campus reps from Morgan Lewis seemed smart, interesting, and interested in her. "I really liked the people."

McKeon signed on.

She joined the litigation practice group and ascended the ranks in "a very normal way." She honed a reputation for intellectual firepower and optimism and generated large amounts of business. Her clients included some of the biggest names on Wall Street.

Within the firm, she took every chance to shine.

"Morgan Lewis cared about diversity very early on," she said. "For people like me and Grace Speights, if you were a strong lawyer, and performing at a high level, the firm was anxious to involve you in more things. I stood out in the crowd. In a group picture, I was the one wearing a red dress in a sea of dark suits."

One challenge she sees now is to "move to where our clients need us. Or better yet, we move to where they soon will need us. That has led us to expand in Asia, particularly China, given the importance of that market for our clients.

"We have teams focused on knowledge management and artificial intelligence, and this past year launched our first ML innovation challenge — with more than 1,700 of our personnel putting forward their ideas to leverage technology," she added. "Having the best talent and legal minds at our firm is even more important when new technology is introduced because our clients bring us their biggest, most complex problems."

Growth will continue but at a

more measured pace. "We want to focus on maintaining the core and have our brand be synonymous with elite client services. Size is a great competitive advantage if you get everything else right, but driving it all is our clients' needs."

As chairman, she has worked to build diversity, "but everybody knows it's not diverse enough," she said. "In particular, lawyers of color at every level are underrepresented in Big Law."

But holding on to diverse talent is tough.

"Our clients are also looking for the same diversity, so we often lose great lawyers of color," McKeon said. "We had four African American partners who are now working for one of our best clients. The profession still has the benefit of those four lawyers, but our firm doesn't."

McKeon puts a premium on relationships. And she spends a lot of time, money, and resources to reinforce that idea at Morgan Lewis.

Law firms usually ask their staffers to write "I love me" memos once a year. The memos give employees a chance "to tell the compensation committee how wonderful they are," McKeon said.

In keeping with McKeon's spirit of collaboration, Morgan Lewis asks them to answer two questions about themselves. "The other nine are about other people, who helped you, who has exemplified the ideals of service, who are the partners who most reflect the culture of collaboration."

"Culture is not something that simply happens. It's something you nurture," McKeon said. "The people who collaborate are the most successful. All the boats rise. We really reinforce that."

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