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Jami Wintz McKeon traveled busy path to chair of Morgan Lewis

By Chris Mondics
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For Jami Wintz McKeon, there were plenty of mile-markers - and traffic alerts - on the way to the top of the legal profession.

There were the red-eye flights from San Francisco to Philadelphia as she recruited 160 lawyers from a failing California firm for Morgan Lewis & Bockius L.L.P., of Center City, then merely a large Northeastern firm, but soon to become a global player.

There was the patronizing demeanor of male courtroom adversaries, which quickly disappeared as McKeon delivered sound legal thrashings.

There was a time, as she managed the complexities of her bicoastal life, McKeon became the single-most prolific BlackBerry user in the United States.

"It saved my life," McKeon said of her BlackBerry, and the added reach it gave.

It all seems to have worked out because on Oct. 1, McKeon will take over as chair of Morgan Lewis, making the 1,400-lawyer firm with more than \$1 billion a year in revenue the largest in the nation headed by a woman. But getting there, McKeon's career track makes clear, was no small challenge. She joins a small sorority of women who have held top leadership roles at major law firms, notably:

► Nina Gussack, the former chair of Pepper Hamilton in Center City until former FBI Director Louis



“If you refuse to accept defeat, you often don’t have to accept it.”

Jami Wintz McKeon, part of her relentlessly upbeat approach

PHOTOGRAPH BY: VIVIANA PERNOT

Jami Wintz McKeon credits good child care with helping her maintain a career and family. "A good marriage is nice; great child care is indispensable," she says. At one point, she was commuting to and from California - and setting BlackBerry records.

Freeh took over leadership of the firm in 2013.

► Christine Lagarde, now managing director of the International Monetary Fund, headed the Baker & McKenzie law firm in Chicago before leaving that job to become French finance minister in the government of Nicolas Sarkozy.

► Kim Koopersmith, of Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld L.L.P., another globe-straddling legal behemoth with offices in Philadelphia.

McKeon's style, and the interest it has provoked among professional

women, was on full display recently in a packed ballroom at the Hyatt at the Bellevue. As waiters streamed through the room ladling out dessert and pouring coffee, McKeon stood at a lectern and, without notes, seamlessly unspooled a 30-minute talk on life in the white-collar trenches.

Then McKeon, the mother of four, took on a question that hundreds of women there doubtless were asking themselves.

How did you do it?

"You have to have good child care. A good marriage is nice; great child

care is indispensable,” said a smiling McKeon, drawing laughter from the crowd.

Rare achievement

Overall, the phenomenon of a woman leading a major firm is rare, and reflects the demographics of Big Law writ large. Nearly half of all associate lawyers at big firms now are women, yet the partnership ranks remain largely the province of men - only one in five are women, according to the National Association for Law Placement, which tracks legal employment trends. On leadership teams, where heads of big firms typically are paid \$1 million or more a year, the air is even more rarefied. The obstacles for men and women both are huge, but for women likely more so.

To McKeon, this is partly because there are so many competing perceptions of what women should do once they hit adulthood.

“Most people don’t express an opinion about how your husband is doing [as a parent],” McKeon, 57, said at the Hyatt at the Bellevue. “But a lot of people will express an opinion about you - ‘Well, you know, she wasn’t around when her kids needed to be picked up.’”

McKeon offers no formulas for reaching the top, except to advise other women to convey authenticity and follow their instincts. Not everyone, she says, needs to be a CEO, and many will be happy doing the important work of being full-time homemakers, a path taken by her two sisters.

McKeon says she admires the work of Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg, who in her book *Lean In* advises women to shoot unerringly for leadership roles, but differs with Sandberg’s prescription that women adapt to male-dominated institutions. McKeon noted with a chuckle during her talk at the Hyatt

at the Bellevue that as women poured into the workforce in the 1970s and 1980s, experts recommended women avoid any suggestion of a family life.

“The common rule at the time was that you should try not to stand out,” she said. “People actually said - there were articles written about this - ‘Don’t have pictures of your children on your desk. Don’t talk about your family. Wear a conservative blue suit.’ The whole idea was to be like a guy.

“But that didn’t work for me, so I had pictures of my kids in my office and the kids visited,” she said.

McKeon, who was a cheerleader and dancer in high school (her mother had been a Broadway dancer before raising her family, her father a food-industry executive), began her career at Morgan in 1981 as a first-year associate out of Villanova University Law School, a time when the firm had few women.

She joined the litigation practice group, and partners quickly zeroed in on her as a standout talent who mastered the complexities of high-stakes litigation while forging tight bonds with clients.

Limitless capacity

Her colleagues say McKeon, who also is on the board of directors of the Kimmel Center, has a seemingly inexhaustible capacity for work. She typically rises at 5 every morning to catch up on legal-industry news and

logging the names of partners, their spouses, and even their children.

Her client list includes some of the biggest names on Wall Street and her matters involve issues of enormous import, often litigation and regulatory struggles in which hundreds of millions of dollars or more are in play. At the firm, she is known as a large business generator.

“We are trial lawyers, and the ability to communicate crisply and effectively, those are two things that Jami . . . had,” said James Pagliaro, a senior Morgan partner who headed the litigation department while McKeon served as his deputy. “She has intellectual firepower.”

One McKeon trademark is her relentlessly, perhaps even wearily, upbeat approach to any complication, whether mundane or more cosmic.

“If you refuse to accept defeat, you often don’t have to accept it,” she said.

Although McKeon won’t take over officially until Oct. 1, she has been busy assembling her leadership team and mapping strategy. The landscape for Big Law changed dramatically after the 2008 financial market collapse, and firms such as Morgan continue to adjust in an environment of tightened competition and flat demand for legal services.

For Morgan and others, that has meant moving away from the traditional approach of billing by the hour and toward charging flat fees

for portfolios of legal services and other tactics, for which Morgan has staff MBAs to game out pricing strategies. McKeon says she also is determined to increase the hiring and promotion of minorities at the firm, on the belief that

it will improve client service.

“I think that if old-line law firms can have women at the head of them, that is a signal that something is changing,” she said.

McKeon’s stature at Morgan grew

“We are trial lawyers, and the ability to communicate crisply and effectively, those are two things that Jami ... had. She has intellectual firepower.”

James Pagliaro, a senior Morgan partner who headed the litigation department with McKeon as his deputy

to answer e-mails from partners in Europe. She spends the early evenings, from 6 to 8, with her family, but then it is back at work, with the day usually ending around midnight.

She is meticulous in mentally cata-

after Francis Milone, who will step down as Morgan's chair when McKeon takes over, gave her responsibility in 2002 for recruiting lawyers from the then-prominent-but-failing Brobeck, Phleger & Harrison law firm in California, and then help assimilate them into Morgan.

Brobeck was one of the best-known legal brands on the West Coast, but had bet heavily on the dot.com boom just before the bubble burst. The firm dissolved in early 2003, but preceding its collapse, McKeon had set up shop in its San Francisco offices, creating a recruitment plan. It was a tough sell at first. Morgan was unknown on the West Coast and McKeon found herself having to explain more than once that she was from a law firm, not J.P. Morgan Chase, the famed bank and investment house.

Shining moment

In the days before the dissolution, things had become particularly grim at Brobeck. Unpaid vendors were carting away copiers and coffee machines. A lawyer told of hiding a printer under her desk so that she could print a brief.

At one meeting with Brobeck lawyers and staff that McKeon attended to answer questions about what it

would be like for lawyers there to join Morgan, a Brobeck lawyer asked when coffee service would be restored.

The next morning McKeon went to the nearby Starbucks and bought 60 gift cards for the Brobeck team.

The following day, 160 lawyers in all, a portion of the larger Brobeck firm, voted to join Morgan.

Senior Morgan partner Brock Gowdy, the then-leader of the Brobeck lawyers who decided to join Morgan, said that McKeon's arguments were decisive.

"She was a very engaging person and a really good lawyer," Gowdy said. "She was the primary force in making the decision to come to Morgan."

But that decision was only the start of a lengthy and complex process of assimilation and acculturation. After commuting for a while, McKeon moved with her husband, John F. Hollway, an author and now associate dean at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, to San Francisco, with their two young children (the two oldest, from an earlier marriage, were in college).

Making sure that Brobeck lawyers were matched up with the right teams, and that they felt welcome,

Jami Wintz McKeon

► **Position:** chair-elect of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP.

► **Home:** Wayne.

► **Family:** Husband John, children Jake, Samantha, Payton, and Maggie.

► **Education:** Villanova University Law School, J.D., 1981; Penn State University, B.A. 1978.

► **Favorite leisure activities:** Cooking for family and friends, dancing to Motown music, riding her cruiser bicycle at the Shore.

► **A favorite book:** *Killing Time – The John Thompson Story*, written by her husband, John Hollway, associate dean at the University of Pennsylvania Law School.

► **Before the law:** Was a cheerleader and dancer in high school.

became McKeon's night job. Her day job was representing her clients back on the East Coast, and that required many red-eye flights back to Philadelphia. It was during that time that McKeon won the distinction of being the most voracious user of BlackBerry services in the country, or so BlackBerry told Morgan Lewis.

Things eased up a bit when airlines began offering wireless connections on flights from California. Then McKeon could fly during the day, working all the while. Through it all, McKeon and her husband sought to create tight relationships with the women who cared for their children. Their first nanny in San Francisco, and her husband and child, lived with the couple.

When the family moved back to Philadelphia, they persuaded a second nanny, an architect, to move with them. But more than the hard work and strategic focus, McKeon says the key was determination.

"I would have to say that apart from a great support, my husband and I share the same philosophy,"



“If old-line law firms can have women at the head, that is a signal that something is changing.” Jami Wintz McKeon

she said. “You know, you just make it work. So maybe you take the red-eye, and maybe you are not getting as much sleep as you like in a perfect world.

“When John is going crazy at work, I think we have to make this work for John, and his view is we have to make this work for me.”

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