

Otten Johnson names trio of women to partnerships

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 DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

The glass ceiling in the legal industry doesn't seem to be budging.

Women lawyers account for only 15 percent of equity partners nationally, a number that hasn't changed in 20 years, according to the National Association of Women Lawyers, based in Chicago.

Denver law firm Otten Johnson Robinson Neff & Ragonetti is bucking that trend.

This month, Otten Johnson named three women to partner and shareholder, effective Jan. 1, 2012.

Julie Gifford, Kim Martin and Amanda Smith spent several years as associates at the real estate and land use-focused law firm, all taking different career paths that eventually led to their equity partnerships.

"It feels good to cross this threshold with two other women," Smith said. "We all worked really hard for a lot of years to get here. Really, all lawyers who make partner have worked hard for a long time."

Denver law firms ahead of average

Denver exceeds the national average when it comes to representation of women among partners, shareholder and nonshareholder, at nearly 25 percent, along with cities such as Miami and San Francisco, according to data released in November by the National Center for Legal Career Professionals.

Birmingham, Ala.; Charlotte, N.C.; Columbus, Ohio; Kansas City, Mo.; and Nashville were among the cities that fell below the national average.

For Otten Johnson, the 40-lawyer firm will have 24 partners as of Jan. 1, one-quarter of them women. All partners at Otten Johnson are shareholders.

It's the first time the firm has promoted an associate to partner in three years.

"Gender didn't come into the discussion whatsoever," said James Johnson, Otten Johnson managing director. "I didn't hear anyone say, 'These are women.' They are excellent attorneys, first and foremost."

Otten Johnson went through its regular process to determine who makes partner, he said, and the fact that all three were women "just happened coincidentally, although it was a pleasant coincidence."



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Amanda Smith, Kim Martin and Julie Gifford are partners at Otten Johnson Robinson Neff + Ragonetti.

The women said they appreciate Otten Johnson's progressive work environment and commitment to staff.

Gifford, who specializes in real estate finance, purchase and sale transactions, was able to work an alternative schedule after she had her first child, which she eventually turned into a formal work/life balance policy for the firm.

"It worked amazingly well. I did it for several years," Gifford said. "I lived up to my end of the deal, and the firm lived up to theirs. It made me feel more committed to the firm."

Gifford also serves as chairwoman of the firm's recruiting committee, so she can help ensure Otten Johnson retains its focus on attracting a diverse mix of talent to the firm.

Smith represents landlords and tenants on commercial leasing on a local and national level, as well as working on land use and development issues. The Denver Bar Association named her the Young Lawyer of the Year in 2009.

Smith said Otten Johnson is "supportive of having a life outside of the firm." She's active in the community, serving on the board for

Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado and working with the Legal Aid Foundation of Colorado to help serve clients in poverty.

"We're all encouraged to do things that are of interest to us," she said. "They value people's individuality. It's not about, 'How does this person fit into a certain mold,' but about playing to people's strengths."

Martin, who represents real estate developers and owners, had a career in aviation management prior to going back to law school. She's also a licensed pilot.

"This is a second career for me," she said. "I was fortunate enough to be a summer clerk here at the firm. I was thrilled to have the opportunity to come back after law school."

Otten Johnson does "an exceptional job of getting associates good experience early on in their careers," Martin said. "The mentoring here, in my experience, is top-notch."

The women said they appreciated their experience as associates, but making partner is providing them a greater sense of pride and commitment to the firm.

"Becoming a partner here means you're a shareholder," Martin said. "I always felt that I had a say in the firm's business, but it's at a different level as a business owner."