

Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell LLP

Miko Ando Brown
Partner

WOMEN'S INITIATIVES



MOTIVATED BY A STRONG DESIRE to see women move up the ranks and succeed in the legal profession, Miko Ando Brown a partner at Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell LLP is on a crusade to strengthen the support network for women attorneys.

The Women in Leadership Lecture Series (WILLS) was launched in 2013 to help Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell's women lawyers build business relationships, identify mentors and sponsors, and create a culture in which women flourish.

Brown said the idea for the lecture series came after attending an inspirational and empowering conference in 2012.

"It was unlike any conference we had ever attended," Brown said. "Typically you come away from conferences for women feeling pretty depressed after talking about all of the obstacles. This conference was different. They spent about 15 minutes talking about all of the challenges we face, which everybody knows. The rest of the time was spent on concrete strategies to make things better."

"Coming back, we said we need to create a program that empowers women and gives them practical skills that they can implement that day and make things better."

On the airplane ride home Brown sent the managing partner an email with details about what she wanted to create. Five months later it was up and running.

The Denver-based civil litigation firm launched the lecture series in 2013 with the goal of addressing two fundamental challenges women attorneys face: to be a partner and leader in a law firm means establishing yourself as a rainmaker, and women attorneys face perceptions and often unconscious biases which create obstacles.

Understanding those realities, with Brown as the driving force, the firm developed a program to advance rainmaking for its women attorneys. Its goals were to develop more high profile, high producing women attorneys, improve recruiting and retention by reinforcing the firm's commitment to diversity and equity, and engage women leaders in law, business, and government who ultimately will become new clients and referral sources.

Instead of asking clients and prospects to come to listen to the firm's lawyers, the plan for the Lecture Series was to flip the formula and invite clients and prospects to come to talk and share their experiences as part of a diverse community. The result is a regular series of panel discussions and networking events.

Greater success for women attorneys translates to success for the firm. Through the lecture series, women are able to openly and regularly share business contacts, ideas, and experiences with others from diverse professions, ages, careers, and life stages. Most

importantly, it promotes female leadership and visibility within and outside the firm.

It also creates a forum for professionals from across the business landscape – including women and men – to engage in open, intimate conversations about gender, culture and careers.

"The feedback has been incredible," Brown said. "Internally it's created optimism and enthusiasm that was never felt before. Every single female attorney is engaged. It has created a cohesiveness and boosted morale."

In 2014, 37 percent of all the firm's lawyers were women and eight percent are lawyers of color; and 17 percent are partners.

Four lecture series were scheduled in 2013. Panelists have included a Colorado Supreme Court Justice, numerous women general counsel of large nationwide companies, and lawyers from government agencies and other institutions. Various women partners and senior associates from different firms have served as moderators.

In 2014, the Women in Leadership Lecture Series continues to grow with more scheduled. In addition to more discussions, the firm will continue the conversation online through its new WILLS LinkedIn group page.

While the networking is helping women to connect to viable business prospects and grow their professional networks, it is also raises awareness of the obstacles women attorneys face.

"In developing WILLS, we focused on doing what was right for the firm and our future generation of lawyers," said Managing Partner Carolyn Fairless. "This award also reinforces that Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell is leading the legal profession in how to develop, support, and retain women attorneys."