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The ladies who lead

By Kerrie Kennedy

They are hard workers, relationship builders, optimists and leaders. And yet their passions, backgrounds and practices each tell their own unique story. In this year's *Chicago Lawyer* Diversity Survey, women accounted for about 44 percent of all lawyers among the firms who responded to the survey. But looking strictly at equity and non-equity partners, only 22.4 percent of all partners among responding firms are women.

For its diversity issue, *Chicago Lawyer* spoke with five women equity partners in Chicago about their path to the top of their profession.

Linda Myers, Kirkland & Ellis

When Linda Myers was a young girl, she and her grandmother watched "Adam's Rib," the classic battle-of-the-sexes film in which Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy play married lawyers on opposing sides of a criminal case. Impressed with Hepburn's strong, feminist character, Myers' grandmother suggested she become a lawyer someday.

"It became my guiding plan," says Myers, who came from humble beginnings and knew of no other lawyers other than the ones she saw in the movies.

Today, Myers heads Kirkland & Ellis' debt finance practice, focusing on debt-financing

transactions like bankruptcy and restructuring for private equity groups, corporations and commercial lending institutions.

While Myers was an economics and international relations major in college, most of her expertise was learned on the job. "We do a lot of training here at Kirkland," she says. "But a lot of it is just good communication — listening to what the client wants and figuring out a way to get it done."

It's a philosophy that kept her putting one foot in front of other when her plate was overflowing, especially during her busy early years. "When I was hired, we had one partner and me who were exclusively dedicated to debt finance, which was ironic given Kirkland's dominance in leveraged buyouts," she says. "Pretty soon, I was working on every single (leveraged buyout) transaction that had a debt-finance piece."

At the same time, Myers was juggling motherhood — she had

three children who are currently 18, 16 and 13 years old. Like Hepburn's character in "Adam's Rib," she married a lawyer who also practices at Kirkland. Between their work and travel schedules, Myers says it was difficult when her kids were young, but her husband understood her working life intimately. "He didn't have a conventional idea that my role was to do things for the kids and his was to pay the bills," she says.

A member of Kirkland's 15-member global management committee, Myers is also the founder of the Women's Leadership Initiative, which focuses on networking, training and promoting diversity within the firm.

"In the early days, there weren't a lot of women here. I was fortunate to be a hard-working person coming up in the right space at the right time," she says. "But as our firm has grown and represents a broader swath of clients, there's been a push to really try to promote talented, diverse lawyers."

While Myers says her work ethic remains as strong as ever, today she manages to find the time for family travel, regular exercise (she's in the gym at 5 a.m. daily), theater outings with the kids (to date, they have seen "Hamilton" four times) and community board involvement.

She and her husband also teach a class at the University of Chicago Law School. Lately, they have noticed an interesting trend. It's the male students who are now worrying about work-life balance issues.

"They'll ask things like 'can I be a coach for my kid's soccer team and still be a partner at Kirkland & Ellis?'" Myers says. "Younger people — whether male or female — going into private practice are much more inclined to want to be involved with their kids' lives and have time to get some exercise and do other things that are important to them. It's become a professional issue, not just a women's issue." ■



Linda Myers