



Together We Rise

Collaboration Leads to Empowerment

By Stephanie F. Jones and Katherine P. Decker

The “having it all” mantra can be rife with pressure, but for Stephanie Jones, it does not have to be. Stephanie shares with us an inspiring and empowering story of success to show how having a family does not have to be an impediment to your legal career.

Kate: 2019 was a big year for you, personally and professionally; you gave birth to your second son, and while you were out on maternity leave, you were promoted to assistant managing partner of Gordon & Rees’ Chicago office. What were you doing when you got the news?

Stephanie: I did have a big year! Bringing a life into the world is a job all on its own. I never expected to have the opportunity to take on a leadership role at the firm at the same time. I was actually out walking the baby in his stroller when I got a call from the managing partner of the Chicago office, Hayes Ryan. At that point, I was not in “work mode”; I was just happy to talk to another adult! I had no idea that he was going to ask me if I was interested in becoming the assistant managing partner of the office.

Kate: How did it make you feel to receive this recognition while you were out on maternity leave?

Stephanie: So often, my fellow attorney-moms are concerned about their bonuses being eliminated, being pulled off large or complex matters, or otherwise losing traction in advancement at their firms when they have babies. Here, I was being celebrated for my ability

to handle both. Admittedly, some feelings of imposter syndrome crept in as I distinctly remember thinking to myself, “Why me, when he could have picked someone who wasn’t on maternity leave?”—a notion I quickly told myself to ignore! I chose to defy those feelings of self-doubt and instead thought of the ways I could add value and bring a different perspective to firm management.

Kate: What advice would you give to younger female attorneys who strive for management positions at their law firms? What advice would you give to yourself fresh out of law school?

Stephanie: Our profession is so rooted in the academic process that I think many of us lose sight of the human element in what we do. Practicing law is as much about the case law and procedure as it is about understanding people. The best experiences that I have had practicing law have come from being a part of a great team, whether it was firm colleagues, joint defense counsels, or clients. Personally, I find work easier and more enjoyable when you are part of a great team. So, take proactive steps: ask questions, volunteer for projects, show up to social outings, and ingratiate yourself into the fabric of the firm. Not only will that allow you space to grow and gain confidence as a practitioner, it will also make you an invaluable asset to the firm, which will pay dividends later.

Kate: How have groups such as the DRI Women in the Law (WITL) Committee affected or helped your career?

Stephanie: The camaraderie I’ve gained through women’s groups in our industry has been invaluable. The DRI WITL Committee, for instance, has allowed me to connect with women in various practice areas across the nation and discover a network of support, friendship, and solidarity. Through these types of organizations, I’ve received tips and advice to facilitate my practice, and of course, a major benefit has been the ability to obtain and provide referrals. The assistance, however, spans beyond the work. One day, I had a client call run late, and I was completely panicked about picking my son up from daycare on time. After seeing me desperately attempting to hail a cab, a friend I met through a women’s group gave me hers. I will never forget that kindness and support from a fellow attorney-mom.



■ Stephanie F. Jones is the assistant managing partner at Gordon Rees Scully Mansukhani LLP, in Chicago. As a litigator, she specializes in defending employers, executives, and businesses in commercial, business, employment, and environmental and toxic tort matters. Ms. Jones prides herself on her ability to partner with her clients to understand the needs of their business, recognize the nuances of each particular matter, and counsel them through contentious situations. She serves on the DRI Women in the Law Steering Committee as the DRI for Life co-liason. Katherine P. “Kate” Decker is as an associate at Gordon Rees Scully Mansukhani LLP in Chicago, whose practice focuses on employment litigation. She represents a wide range of employers from small businesses to multimillion dollar companies with thousands of employees, helping her clients navigate each turn of the litigation process. Ms. Decker also advises and counsels clients through negotiation and drafting of employment agreements, policies, and employee handbooks and provides on-site trainings for employees.



Kate: What are some ways that you've seen the women of Gordon & Rees band together to support one another and lift each other up?

Stephanie: Gordon Rees is the first firm to have offices in all fifty states. This platform encourages all of our attorneys to collaborate on matters for clients across the country, but I have noticed the women of the firm cross-marketing together, sharing work, and referring matters to each other, which are incredible opportunities to help each other's advancement in the firm.

Kate: What are some difficulties that you've faced as both a woman and a mother while working in the legal field?

Stephanie: I wish I could say that I have been immune to difficulties in this industry because of being a woman or a mother, but unfortunately, I have not. At a different firm, I remember conveying my interest in taking a more active role on trial teams to a male partner. Instead of welcoming the addition, he questioned whether I could ever be a reliable trial attorney when I had a young child at home and a working husband. I initially responded by describing all the sacrifices I would make, but after some self-reflection, I realized I did not want to work with someone who could not see my value because I chose to have a family. Luckily, I am now at a firm where I feel incredibly supported both professionally and personally.

Kate: We hear a lot about "empowerment" these days. What does that word mean to you?

Stephanie: Empowerment means being surrounded by people who support, encourage, help, and lift you up. For me, I get a lot of comfort and confidence by having a tribe of inspiring women beside me. In firm life, that means seeing more women in leadership and decision-making roles, as well as growing larger books of business. If more women are in those positions, they can empower others to do the same.

Kate: What can law firms do to create a culture that not only empowers women but also ensures that there is a clear path of success?

Stephanie: Firms can appoint leaders who will support women. In my experience, that was evident in how I was treated when I had my two boys. When I was on maternity leave with my first son, our managing partner gave me a pay increase and a title promotion. When I was on maternity leave the second time, he promoted me to assistant managing partner. That sends a powerful message that not only will you not be punished for having a family, you will be supported. It takes strong leadership to see the value in long-term retention of women and not be discouraged by the financial effect of having an attorney out on leave.

Kate: What is something that you hope to see happen in the legal field in the next ten years?

Stephanie: I still look around in courtrooms across the country and see mostly white men attending court appearances, handling substantive motions, and trying cases. My hope is to see more women and people of color doing those same things. From there, the natural progression should be to see those people being promoted to equity partners and holding substantive leadership roles in their firms, and maybe even finding their way to the bench or becoming public officials and changemakers.

Kate: If you weren't a lawyer, what would you be doing?

Stephanie: As a former athlete, I would love to work in the fitness industry. Either that, or I would be living in Santa Barbara working at a winery!

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