



A Blueprint for Progress

BY NANCY BURKE HUPP

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In December 2019, the executive director of the National Association for Law Placement summed up 15 years of data on diversity in U.S. law firms in a press release: “Despite steady gains, great structural and cultural hurdles remain that prevent law firms from being able to measure more rapid progress in increasing diversity. ...”

Robins Kaplan is no stranger to prejudice. In 1938, two Jewish men started the firm because they could not get a seat at the table at top Minneapolis firms. The firm established a diversity committee decades ago, long before many firms. Over the years, the committee created and then collaborated with internal affinity groups – the LGBTQ+ Resource Group, the Attorneys of Color Resource Group, and the Women of Robins Kaplan Resource Group – to identify and implement programming to support the recruitment, retention and advancement of diverse attorneys. The firm accumulated accolades for their efforts, but in the wake of racial tension and civil unrest in 2020, they realized they had more work to do – more in-depth work – to eradicate racial inequities, ensure

that the firm makeup more closely mirrors society, and contribute their learnings to the wider legal community.

Galvanized, they began by setting five ambitious diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals and sharing them publicly to promote transparency and accountability. The goals are comprehensive and specific with a focus on historically underrepresented individuals. After adopting the five overarching DEI goals, the board hired a director of diversity, equity and inclusion to implement the goals, continue DEI work, and assess ongoing progress.

Black firm members representing both attorneys and staff launched the Black Firm Members Resource Group (BFMG) in 2020. BFMG submitted goals related to increasing the representation of Black firm members by 2025. In recognition of the unique historical and systemic obstacles facing Black individuals, the executive board approved the specific targets.

In 2020, Partner Tim Purdon joined Sharon Roberg-Perez as the committee’s co-chair. The appointment of Purdon, a partner located in the firm’s Bismarck, North Dakota office and a former United States Attorney, under-

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scored the board’s commitment to the principal that work on DEI issues at Robins Kaplan is the responsibility of everyone at the firm, and in particular, of all of the firm’s partners, not just those from historically underrepresented groups.

Over the next nine months, and in parallel to the work of the BFMG, Purdon and Roberg-Perez went on an internal “listening tour.” The firm’s three resource groups shared concerns and helped them formulate solutions. Mindful that “what gets measured, gets done,” the co-chairs also focused on ways to evaluate progress. The first set of meetings with the resource groups focused on recruitment and retention and the second, on advancement. Purdon and Roberg-Perez then presented recommendations to the receptive and diverse board.

The new DEI-focused initiatives are far-reaching, from recruiting more diverse staff, to marketing to companies that value DEI, to tracking the identity of attorneys involved in client pitches (to ensure an equitable distribution of workload and opportunities). The initiatives also cover recruitment and retention by expanding the employment pipeline for all roles to include schools and organizations with significant percentages of diverse students and professionals; by enhancing associate development; and by developing training for all partners and managers on inclusive leadership techniques for work allocation, trial opportunities, mentorship, and succession planning.

To assess progress, the firm will measure individual partner contributions and improve data reporting, which the DEI committee co-chairs

will review and share on a quarterly basis with the executive board and partners. The firm recently became a charter member of Calibrate ID, a diversity survey designed to provide benchmarking data and drive innovation to increase diversity and inclusion in professional staff roles at Am-Law 200 firms.

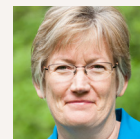
The last 18 months of work has made an impact:

- Fifty percent of the attorneys promoted to partner in 2020 are from historically underrepresented groups.
- *Profiles in Diversity Journal* named co-chair Sharon Roberg-Perez to its 2021 Women Worth Watching list.
- Robins Kaplan has received a perfect score of 100 on The Human Rights Corporation Corporate Equality Index and named a Best Place to Work for LGBTQ+ Equality for multiple years.
- The firm achieved Mansfield Certification again, and for the first time, achieved Plus status for Mansfield 4.0 (2021). The Plus status indicates that in addition to meeting or exceeding the baseline diversity certification requirements, the firm reached at least 30% underrepresented lawyer representation in a notable number of current leadership roles.
- *Diversity & Flexibility Alliance* named Robins Kaplan a Tipping the Scales law firm for having 50% or more women in its new partner class in 2021.

Robins Kaplan’s focus on diversity extends beyond the firm’s walls into the community. Robins Kaplan was a

major driver in forming Twin Cities Diversity in Practice (TCDIP), and gaining early legal community support. The firm recently also joined as a founding member of the Wanton Injustice Legal Detail (WILD), an affiliate of TCDIP. WILD aims to amplify and support the work of community organizations combating racism across the Twin Cities. Additionally, the firm provides support to professional and community organizations such as the Minnesota Association of Black Lawyers, The Barristers’ Breakfast benefitting Joyce Preschool, The St. Thomas Racial Justice Initiative, and other community organizations focused on advancing DEI.

Both co-chairs see a new day in DEI and hope publicizing the firm’s goals and process will galvanize efforts at other firms. Robins Kaplan is confident that their approach – comprehensive, methodical, and measurable – is key to making meaningful and lasting progress. Contributing best practices to the profession will encourage conversation and action and improve conditions for all.



NANCY BURKE HUPP IS A FREELANCE WRITER AND EDITOR, WITH EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE WRITING ON LEGAL AND HEALTHCARE TOPICS, BOTH FOR DIGITAL AND PRINT. PRIOR TO

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