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A 35-Year Blueprint for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Diversity & Inclusion

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The legal profession has reached a tipping point. Decades of aspirational words from private law firms about diversity, equity, and inclusion are giving way to concrete action.

At Kozyak Tropin & Throckmorton (KTT), diversity has been a key to success from the beginning. For nearly 40 years, KTT has prioritized attracting and retaining elite talent to foster a diverse and inclusive firm. Active inclusion is a perpetually evolving, forward-looking process. What was once innovative and brave now seems obvious, and that is a good thing—it is a sign of progress.

Every firm is the sum of its parts, and KTT's lawyers are leaders in communities as broad and diverse as our own South Florida community. KTT is home to four former presidents of the Cuban American Bar Association, a former president of the Gwen S. Cherry Black Women Lawyers Association, a former president and a past director of local chapters of the Florida Association for Women Lawyers, a former president of the Asian Pacific American Bar Association of South Florida, three former presidents of the Bankruptcy Bar Association for the Southern District of Florida, and several directors and the co-founders of the Kozyak Minority Mentoring Foundation. KTT attorneys currently serve in leadership positions on the Florida Bar Board of Governors, the South Florida Chapter of the FBA, the Florida Board of Medicine, and the Florida Association of Managing Partners.

Diversity is an inherent part of our firm identity. In the mid-2000s, KTT was recognized by the Florida Supreme Court as being one of the only firms in the state to have more women lawyers than men. Today, a third of the firm's lawyers are women, and a third are racial minorities.

Several years ago, Cori Lopez-Castro and Detra Shaw-Wilder gave a presentation on diversity to the Florida Association of Managing Partners (of which Lopez-Castro is the current president). When asked about KTT's consistent success in attracting and retaining minority lawyers, Lopez-Castro answered that it is simply part of the firm's DNA. For founding members John Kozyak and Harley Tropin, this is quite literally true, as each inherited his dedication to diversity and inclusion from his mother.

Kozyak grew up in a segregated St. Louis suburb where “colored only” signs were part of the landscape, and where racist sentiments persisted long after the signs were removed. There was not a single Black student in Kozyak's high school class of nearly one thousand, and he did not meet his first Black peer until college. Kozyak's mother, Marilyn, set an enduring example for her son

by making a point of sitting on the “wrong side” of the lunch counter at Kresge’s drugstore in St. Louis.

Tropin’s mother, Ruth, was equally unafraid of standing up for the rights of the marginalized. A Jewish woman born in New Jersey, she traveled to Germany in 1938 to work for a program persuading other European nations to accept Holocaust refugees. After three years in Germany, she returned to the United States to continue the same efforts. For three decades, she worked to resettle war refugees, including Holocaust survivors, Cubans fleeing the Castro regime, and Ugandans escaping Idi Amin.

Kozyak and Tropin both encountered anti-Semitism in Miami’s legal community when they entered the job market after law school. At the same time, their wives and KTT co-founder Chuck Throckmorton’s wife, all of whom were also attorneys, were experiencing firsthand the sexism in legal hiring: women were presumed to be short-term candidates who would likely abandon legal practice for motherhood. That a woman could be both a lawyer and a mom—or that a man could choose to cut back on work for fatherhood—were new and disfavored concepts.

Kozyak, Tropin, and Throckmorton began working together at the Miami office of one of Florida’s largest statewide firms. At the urging of now-Senior U.S. District Court Judge Paul C. Huck (also a former KTT partner), that firm merged with a firm of Cuban lawyers led by the current mayor of Coral Gables, Raul Valdes-Fauli, providing them with new insights into the Cuban-American experience in Miami and the legal community. In 1982, Kozyak, Tropin, and Throckmorton formed KTT and moved into its first office during the Overtown race riots. Kozyak and Tropin watched the fires burning to the west from the stairwell of their building. Amid the brew of racial tensions, anti-immigrant sentiments, the anti-gay “Save the Children” campaign, and lingering anti-Semitism of the 1980s, they resolved to chart a different path for their new firm.

KTT’s perspective on hiring was strongly influenced by Kozyak’s early experiences in recruiting at top law schools in the East. Black attorneys were deemed employable if they were smart. If they were well-educated. If they were “clean,” “articulate,” and “not too pushy.” Kozyak observed the consequences of such attitudes when one large firm’s offer of permanent employment to a summer law clerk, an impressive Black Harvard law student

who spoke perfect Spanish, was declined because of the candidate's concern about the conspicuous lack of support for Black people and Black attorneys in Miami at the time. With such memories fresh in their minds, Tropin and Kozyak led KTT's creation of an annual scholarship for a Black student in the University of Miami Litigation Skills program as a small way to encourage talented Black students to stay in Miami.

Rather than just trying to avoid racist or sexist hiring practices, KTT has strived from the beginning to proactively combat inequities. Its first new employees were a Black woman and a gay man. Within a few years, Kozyak, Tropin, and Throckmorton had welcomed their first new partner, Janet Humphreys, who, along with Shaw-Wilder, KTT's first Black female lawyer, would later obtain the largest jury verdict in KTT's history.

Lopez-Castro became KTT's first Cuban American female lawyer when she joined the firm after graduating from law school in 1990. The managing partners quickly realized that Lopez-Castro's network of Miami lawyers and businesspeople rivaled their own, another reminder that diverse hiring is essential to success in a diverse community.

The firm was also fortunate enough to attract Laurel Isicoff, another woman who had risen through the ranks in Big Law but wanted a change. KTT offered Isicoff what she needed: challenging work, new energy, and the flexibility to grow in her career while raising her kids. The firm soon promoted her to partner while she was working part time.

Isicoff, a legal superstar who is now chief judge for the U.S. Bankruptcy Court in the Southern District of Florida, was also instrumental in introducing KTT to minority mentoring at the University of Miami (UM). In 1994, she helped connect the firm to Shaw-Wilder, who was a new UM law graduate. A powerhouse litigator and constant ethical beacon, Shaw-Wilder is an influential presence in Miami's Black legal and business communities. Kozyak and Shaw-Wilder co-founded the Kozyak Minority Mentoring Foundation, through which countless minority law students and young lawyers have been paired with mentors in the community. While the original and primary focus of the foundation is mentorship for Black law students, it has also formed close relationships with the Cuban American Bar Association, the Florida Association for Women Lawyers, the Gay and Lesbian

Lawyers Association, the Haitian Lawyers Association, the Florida Muslim Bar, and other voluntary bar associations.

Four women—Shaw-Wilder, Lopez-Castro, Judge Isicoff, and Gail McQuilkin—have served as managing partner of the firm, and each has left her unique stamp on the firm’s culture.

But diversity is not just about race and sex. Family dynamics, physical and mental health, faith, and myriad other facets of identity contribute to a law firm’s makeup. KTT’s current (and youngest) managing partner, Javier Lopez, has collaborated with his mentor, Tropin, to encourage open discussions about addiction, anxiety, and depression, all of which plague our profession. In an effort to reduce the stigma that so often prevents honest conversations about mental health, Lopez and Tropin have given talks at law schools, government agencies, and bar associations across the state. By modeling honesty and vulnerability, they have promoted the message that lawyers should feel no shame in acknowledging and seeking help with mental health issues.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic made telecommuters of us all, KTT allowed its lawyers the flexibility of working part time and working from home or a satellite office. These accommodations to the varying demands on our schedules have paid off exponentially. KTT has promoted partners who were working part time and while they were on maternity leave. This year, KTT had a partner taking key depositions in a federal case via Zoom while working from home with his newborn and his toddler: welcome to 2021! And when male attorneys take paternity leave or work part time while raising their children, they take pressure off women colleagues who may be apprehensive about making similar important decisions. Add to this a collaborative ethos where attorneys volunteer to provide backup for one another during religious holidays, vacations, or family crises, and the goal of a family-friendly workplace becomes a reality.

Achieving diversity and inclusion at a law firm is not a rote exercise of looking at a checklist and realizing “we need an Asian-American woman.” But it turns out that hiring brilliant candidates who bring different racial, cultural, religious, and gender perspectives is the best way to grow and succeed. When a firm’s lawyers look like its juries, its judges, its clients—its community—

greater success will follow. Our different backgrounds translate into a wider variety of creative ideas and solutions that we can offer to our clients.

In a Miami Herald article nearly 20 years ago, Kozyak said, “If you’re not prejudiced or rigid, imagine the talent you can attract.” The continuing successes of KTT’s diverse and effective team of lawyers prove the wisdom of these words.