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CHICAGO

PAPER CUTS 016

How Chicago's scrappy tabloid got shredded

BY JOSEPH WEBER



THE LEGAL LADDER

Where Women Attorneys Get Ahead

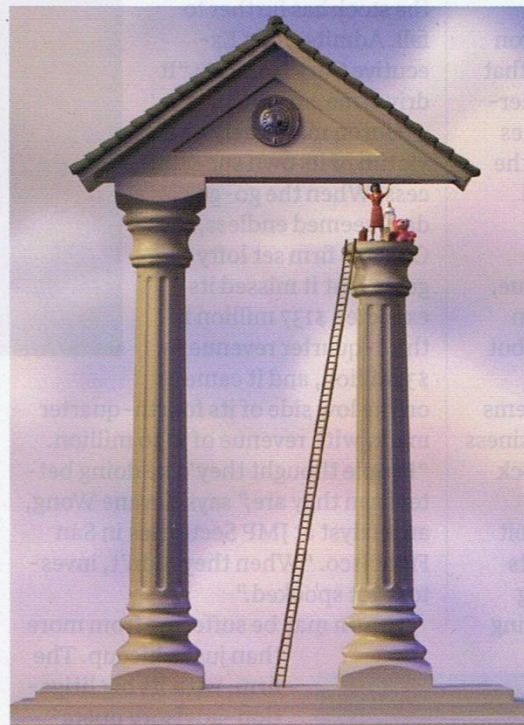
Unlike the big sweatshop firms, Beermann Swerdlove lets mothers work flexible schedules

By Ann C. Logue

Deane B. Brown started her legal career at a high-powered firm that tops many new lawyers' lists. But when her daughter, Morgan, was born in 1996, the Boston University Law School grad worked nights and weekends to meet the billing requirements, leaving her feeling cheated. "At that point, I knew I needed to go to a smaller firm," she says. In 2002, she joined Beermann Swerdlove, working in commercial litigation and employment law. "We appreciate that people have lives outside of the office here," she says.

Law is a notoriously demanding profession for those with ambition. To become a partner, associates typically have to charge clients for at least 2,000 hours of work a year, though that minimum can rise to 2,400 hours at top-tier outfits—or 46 billable hours each and every week of the year. The burden falls especially hard on mothers, who've got kids to tend and households to manage. Little wonder that while half of all law school grads are women, only 17.2% of partners are, according to the Project for Attorney Retention at the University of California Hastings College of Law in San Francisco.

Beermann Swerdlove lies on the outer slope of this bell curve. Fully half of the Chicago firm's 30 attorneys are women, including eight of its 19



partners. The firm—started 50 years ago by four DePaul University College of Law grads in the Swerdlove family's sewing-machine shop in Bucktown—didn't set out to be so egalitarian. Rather, says partner Miles N. Beermann, it happened because he and the other founders had a different attitude about work. "I didn't ever want to be involved in running a sweatshop," says Beermann, 73.

"I want people to want to come here in the morning."

A timely trend in the legal

business helped, too. Many women who entered law in the early 1970s specialized in family law, which was becoming one of the firm's specialties. Today, about half of Beermann Swerdlove's business is in divorce. Its clients are mostly the hoi polloi, but it has represented such headliners as Chicago Bulls legend Michael Jordan. Pamela J. Hutul, a family lawyer, joined Beermann Swerdlove as its first female partner in 1996. Brown came next.

To put its philosophy into practice, the firm requires associates to bill a relatively modest minimum of 1,800 hours a year. Attorneys may work on a flexible schedule or from home as long as the work gets done and the client is happy. There is a tradeoff: Starting salaries for associates are about half of the big firms' \$150,000 or so, and partners rarely make the \$1 million or more that a partner might earn at a much larger firm.

DIFFERENT INCENTIVE

To make up for some of that pay gap, the firm, now based in the Loop, gives associates a percentage of new business they bring in, an arrangement unheard of at many partnerships. That, says Brown, a past president of the Professional Women's Club of Chicago, develops better partners than lawyers whose main skill is enduring heavy workloads. "In the long run, the lawyers who achieve success are ones who bring in their own business," she says.

Women are no longer a novelty at top law firms, of course. Kirkland & Ellis, one of the largest in Chicago, has 263 partners in its home office. Of them, 58, or 22%, are women. That's almost four times as many as at Beermann Swerdlove. But Beermann says his firm stands out. "The clients get it," he says. "When they are here, they see that it's a relaxed atmosphere. But they know that when the chips are down—when we have to be in court or have a heavy negotiation—we don't look at the clock." | BW |

Giving associates a percentage of the new business they bring in develops better lawyers than imposing killer workloads