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The Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law Firms: From dream to reality

By Pamela M. Belyn¹

Chicago has always been a city of firsts, from the Ferris wheel and steel-frame skyscrapers to McDonald's and Twinkies. That passion for innovation also holds true in the local legal industry, where Chicago once again is leading the pack. In the summer of 2008, a group of more than 30 women's initiatives in Chicago law firms came together to form the Coalition of Women's Initiatives in Law Firms—the first organization of its kind in the United States. The Coalition's mission is to benefit member firms by providing positive avenues of communication, collaboration and guidance that help member groups to enhance the recruitment, retention and promotion of women lawyers and support the building, implementation and continued relevancy of women's initiatives in law firms.

With these goals in mind, the Coalition works collectively to provide a forum for sharing the positive efforts and successes of women's initiatives in law firms; to serve as a resource for leaders and members of women's initiatives within each member firm; and to share knowledge by coordinating resources from inside and outside the legal com-

munity to provide training and perspectives on how to be successful in today's business environment.

The dream

The Coalition was the brainchild of Nicole Nehama Auerbach, an alum of Katten Muchin, Rosenman LLP who is now a principal of Valorem Law Group LLC and the Coalition's first President. In March 2007, Auerbach and the other founder of Katten's women's initiative, partner Tara Kamradt, hosted a breakfast meeting of representatives of women's initiatives to discuss the common issues affecting women at law firms around the city. From this initial gathering, a steering committee was formed and charged with developing the Coalition's mission and initial steps to formalization. Fast forward to July 2008, when the Coalition held elections for its 18 board members. The board subsequently created six committees (Policy, Community Outreach, Finance, Programming, Public Relations and Membership) to carry out the mission statement of the Coalition. "We were both thrilled and amazed at how quickly things came together for the Coalition," said Auerbach. "The passion and com-

mitment that these women had in the beginning remains a driving force for us today. The momentum we've already created is testament to the incredible potential of women attorneys in Chicago and beyond."

The reality

Currently, the Coalition's various committees are taking the lead in spreading the word about the organization and its mission. The Programming Committee, with a goal of hosting at least one event per month, has a full slate of programs scheduled for 2009 ranging from networking best practices to the annual National Speaker Forum focused on issues for women in business. During February's event, titled "Approaches and Alternatives for Implementing a Business Development Initiative," Deborah Knupp of Akina Corporation and Paula Giovacchini of Gio Group, Inc. discussed strategies that Coalition delegates and alternate delegates can apply in their own firms to expand women's business development initiatives while taking into account today's economic climate. More recently, the Community Outreach Committee sponsored a panel discussion

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and networking reception for first- and second-year law students. Titled "Success Strategies for Women in Law Firms," the April 8th event drew an enthusiastic crowd of approximately 75 students and 30 Coalition delegates.

But the most visible contribution of the committees to date has come from the Public Relations Committee, which recently debuted the Coalition's Web site (www.thewomenscoalition.com). Launched in March, the site offers a glimpse of the Coalition's mission, programming and sponsorship

opportunities, as well as information on how to become a member firm. "Our new Web site gives us a much-needed public forum that shows the Chicago legal and business community how a group of dedicated women attorneys can take a dream and turn it into reality," said Sharon Hwang, a Shareholder at McAndrews, Held & Malloy, Ltd. and Chair of the Public Relations Committee. "Our hope is that women in other law firms will learn about the Coalition, take inspiration from our initial success and ultimately become a part of our future

growth."

With an overall goal of promoting a dialogue and a support network among the members of various law firm women's initiatives, the Coalition is well on its way to helping fuel the continued growth of these important organizations and the professional development of women in the practice of law.

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