

2016 WOMEN IN LAW

Attorney at Law Magazine is pleased to introduce some of the prominent and successful women lawyers who set the standards for the industry in Minnesota. In addition to profiling some of the top women in the field, we had the chance to talk about the law firms that support the diversity and flexibility that promote women in the field of law.



Kristi K. Brownson



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Being the Best in the Room

By Haley Freeman

Attorney Kristi K. Brownson is a partner and distinguished trial attorney at national litigation defense firm Brownson & Linnihan PLLP. She has been repeatedly recognized for her excellence in the practice of law, as evidenced by her AV Preeminent Peer Review Rating in the Martindale-Hubbell legal directory. One of Kristi's defining professional traits is that she is a doer, and this quality has served her well as a woman and leader in the law.

Kristi hails from Bismarck, North Dakota, where her an-

cestors were homesteaders, and she grew up on a ranch surrounded by her extended family. She formed the desire to become an attorney while she was still in elementary school. She attributes this early awareness and self-confidence to an important woman in her life who fostered her interests and created opportunities for her to explore them.

"I'm fortunate that my mom put me in 4-H," she recalled. "From the third grade, I became active in speech and demonstration competitions. I got a thrill from researching, preparing and standing up in front of people.

Later, I became a 4-H ambassador, a leadership team directing 4-H activities across North Dakota. Today, standing on behalf of someone as a litigator is an honor. It all started with my mom, who was devoted to taking me, as a young girl, to give speeches in towns across North Dakota.”

From those early experiences, Kristi honed skills that would serve her well in her future law career. After graduating cum laude from the University of Minnesota Law School, she took a position with a small litigation firm in Minneapolis. She was interviewed and hired by attorney Robert “Bob” Brownson. “He handled a lot of asbestos defense work and other insurance-related, civil defense litigation. Specifically, I was hired to travel to what I then considered ‘exotic’ places like Texas and New York, where I was immediately given responsibility for hearings and depositions. I did not really know what that entailed at the time, but I really took to it and found I loved the variety of clients and the challenging nature of the work.”

When Bob Brownson formed what is now Brownson & Linnihan in 2001, he invited Kristi to join him, and in 2004, she was offered a partnership. After practicing law together for 19 years, Kristi and Bob Brownson were married in 2014, and they became partners in every sense. “I’d spent years respecting what Bob does. He’s one of the best lawyers I’ve ever seen, and I’ve always tried to emulate him. It’s been fun. We really enjoy working together.”

In her 20-plus years as an attorney, Kristi has acquired practical wisdom. “In my practice, I strive to be the best attorney in the room, be it a meeting, a courtroom or wherever I am – not the best woman attorney – but the best attorney. Period. One of the simple things is just to be the most prepared and organized. I have learned that when I attend a meeting and I show up with a prepared agenda, I then lead the meeting.”

She continued, “If women have an interest in litigation or law office management, I encourage them to do it. It has been a challenge at times to be the only woman in the room. Sometimes at depositions, for instance, I’d get asked if I were the court reporter. I didn’t really encounter many women in leadership positions, but I looked around and said, ‘I like to do that stuff.’ I think it’s part of showing up and being the best. Sometimes women have a different way of doing things than men, and that can be good for everyone when it’s done with the best interests of the law firm and clients at heart. Making tough choices is a part of that. Acting on choices has been very rewarding for me.”

Kristi and her colleagues set the standard for excellence in their firm. “Whenever someone joins the firm in any capacity, we make it clear that in all situations our goal is to be the best in the room. Our professionalism is vital to representing our clients well, especially when they have complex cases.”

Kristi has been a leader in leveraging technology to help the firm and its clients to save green, in the form of both trees and money. “I have hundreds of cases, many in national asbestos litigation, and I have zero paper files. It’s hard to achieve, but I think it’s really important. When I walk into a deposition, I only want to have an iPad or laptop with me. We are technologically advanced in our document management and the way we communicate with our clients. When I’m away from the office, I have access to everything. It makes my response time quicker and my information accurate. My firm and I work with cases and attorneys from coast-to-coast, and we must have a cost-effective way to oversee hundreds of cases with good results. We are aware that this is the client’s money, and we treat that with respect.”

Since the firm’s inception, Kristi has led a program creating opportunities for aspiring young professionals by hiring “project assistants,” top college students who fill the roles of office staff. “They are the face of our firm. They do projects like digitizing old files and preparing notebooks for meetings,

and they are fully integrated with our team. We don’t have a secretarial staff here, and it helps to keep our overhead down while giving opportunities to young people.” Alumni of the Project Assistant program have achieved success in law, business, banking and the arts.

The firm is also committed to giving back to the community. Kristi takes a special interest in animal welfare organizations. She and her husband have four rescue pets at their home. “The firm takes pride in coming together as a team through its charitable activities to be of service to the community.”

Kristi is in company with the top litigators in her practice area, handling complex matters across the nation. She is a forward-thinking leader in her firm and in the profession, who is constantly seeking creative ways to improve her practice and show up as the best in the room. “My husband always says, ‘If you’re not moving forward, you’re moving backward.’ I hope the work we are doing here is an inspiration to other professionals, women and men, who want to achieve success.”

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