

Minorities, Women Making Few Inroads at the Top

By SANDRA BODOVITZ

Whether it is the so-called "glass ceiling" or simply that women and minorities have not been in practice long enough, the reality of entertainment law in Los Angeles is that the top echelons are still dominated by white men.

But women have made inroads both at large firms and boutiques, with many achieving partnership and building up impressive client rosters of their own.

Minorities have had a harder time, with only a handful having achieved partnership at major firms in town.

Where black attorneys have been successful over the years is in the music area, which has traditionally been more open to black artists.

"I've been at Loeb and Loeb since 1974, and I've been practicing entertainment law most of that time," says Leroy Bobbitt, a partner and vice president of the Black Entertainment and Sports Lawyers Association. "During the years I've been at it, there have been very few black entertainment lawyers, particularly in film and television."

Mr. Bobbitt is the only black attorney in Loeb's 40-attorney entertainment department, although a black associate has been hired to start in the fall.

Philip J. Grosz, head of Loeb's entertainment department, says the firm would like to hire more minorities but that in terms of lateral hires, he receives few resumes from minority attorneys.

Over the past few years, there has been an increasing number of opportunities for black attorneys in television and film as black artists have gained prominence in those industries. Law firms see an opportunity to gain those artists as clients by having a black attorney on staff.

"What I've seen in recent months is firms trying to hire people away from firms and vice versa," says Mr. Bobbitt. "But we're talking about the same small pool of people. Very few of the firms hire people out of law school and train them for entertainment."

The story remains the same: The boutiques are not set up to train inexperienced attorneys, so they rely on the big firms to train recent law school graduates.

But getting into a big firm entertainment department is very competitive and only the top law school graduates, mostly non-minorities, are hired.

"We had a summer program and out of 19 people, 14 wanted to do entertainment,"

says Mr. Grosz. Now, the entertainment department has its own summer program for about three or four students a year. "No one else is eligible for our department. There are two separate tracks into the firm."

Joseph Horacek III, head of the motion picture and television department at Manatt, Phelps, Phillips & Kantor, says he has not come across any prejudice toward minorities or women at his firm or others with which he has dealt. "I also don't find a great bending of the standards, to a lower level," he says.

Black attorneys say that what is needed is not a lowering of the standards but an appreciation of different strengths and backgrounds.

"While there is a desire to recruit from the top law schools, they need to open it up," says Stephen D. Barnes, a black partner at Bloom, Dekom & Hergott. "They need to look at the life experiences of lawyers. . . I

think there are a lot of factors that go into making a person successful. Some of the things [students] may have had to overcome to make themselves competitive — those are things that might be helpful in a law practice."

Other black attorneys agree that it is not enough for the firms to sit back and wait for qualified minority candidates to appear.

Rachel N. Young, an attorney in the television department at Warner Bros. Inc. and president of the John M. Langston Bar Association of Los Angeles for black attorneys, says firms should be networking with minority bar associations.

"They should be making an effort to meet and interview minority law students and work with the minorities they do have within their companies," to identify other minorities when positions become available, she says.

Gary A. Watson, a newly hired senior associate at Greenberg, Glusker, Fields, Claman & Machtinger, says he found membership in the Black Entertainment and Sports Lawyers Association to be a great way to network when he first moved to Los Angeles.

After beginning his career at a large law firm, he moved in-house at Universal in 1989, where he was the only black professional in the 60-70 person motion picture group.

"There really is an old-boys' network going on," he says, and that makes it difficult for black attorneys to hear about openings at firms.

Women have fared better than minorities in the world of entertainment law, achieving partnership status at many firms and boutiques and dominating the legal ranks at several studios. (Story, Page 17).

"I think in the 23 years I've been practicing in this area the ascendancy of women in entertainment law has been phenomenal," says Robert M. Dudnik, head of the entertainment department at Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker. "Now, I find I am taking instructions frequently from in-house attorneys in legal and business affairs who are women and from women in major law firms."

The Bloom Dekom boutique has a good reputation for hiring and promoting women into the partnership ranks. "A third of our 15 or 16 partners are women," says partner Peter Dekom. "All we do is hire the best. We have no policies about this stuff."

It is still tougher for women attorneys to establish themselves than it is for men, but entertainment may be better than some more traditional fields because clients are artists who are generally more open-minded, says Melanie Cook, a partner at Bloom Dekom, whose clients include director Barry Sonnenfeld, actresses Laura Dern and Mariel Hemingway and producer Scott Rudin.

At 14-partner Ziffren, Brittenham & Branca, two partners are women. Partner Kathleen Hallberg says the firm is "gender blind" and that in hiring, although the best candidate would get the job, if anything there would be a predilection toward hiring a woman.

"I think my firm is an exception," says Ms. Hallberg. "The people here are all incredibly enlightened and young."

Although women are making progress in boutiques, larger firms and in-house, some women attorneys say they are still in the shadow of their male power-broker colleagues.

"Right now out of the top 10 lawyers there won't be any women or minorities, but in the next five years there might be," says Ms. Cook.

But another female entertainment attorney, who asked to remain anonymous, was less optimistic.

"My opinion is that sexism isn't going to change until its bred out of our sons and their sons," she says.

Sexism is evident, less from other attorneys, than from entertainment industry clients, who she says are not particularly open-minded. The Rosalind Shays syndrome still exists — clients want a killer attorney but when women are tough they are called bitches, as was the now deceased "L.A. Law" character.

However, she says not all clients feel that way. "There's a lot of situations I've been involved in that have required a lot of stroking and patience," she says. "I don't think my [male] partners would have been able to do that. I have plenty of clients who say they would never be represented by a guy again."