

Women-owned firm certification advances diversity in legal industry

By **Todd Nelson** | MARCH 22, 2022

Nilan Johnson Lewis chief executive Kim Ess says the firm's certification as a women-owned business is proof of its "desire to really move diversity ahead in the legal industry."

The certification is from the nonprofit Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC), the largest third-party certifier of businesses owned, operated and controlled in the United States.

"We're hoping certainly that it continues to help us with attracting people to the firm, and retaining the wonderful employees that we currently have," Ess said of the certification. "I don't think it's a surprise to too many people that it also is something that we hope keeps us fiercely independent. As national firms continue to move into a number of metropolitan markets and certainly the Minneapolis-St. Paul market, we think it's a really good way for us to continue to be independent and function as a midsize firm in that market."

With 61 attorneys, the Minneapolis firm is one of the largest certified women-owned practices in the country, Nilan Johnson Lewis (N JL) stated last month in announcing the achievement. Of 113 firms listed as women-owned, 19 reported a firm size of 20-50 attorneys, according to the 2021 directory of the National Association of Minority and Women Owned Law Firms (NAMWOLF). None reported more than 50.

At N JL, women account for 38 percent of shareholders and now own 53 percent of the firm, Ess said.

For a business to achieve WBENC certification, women must own a majority of all shares and represent



From left: Kim Ess, Heidi Christianson, Janet Stellpflug

a majority of the board of directors. Certification also requires that the highest officer of the firm must be a woman; in addition to Ess serving as CEO, Heidi Christianson is the N JL's president.

"It demonstrates our continued leadership in the industry, being a place where women can have a balance of career and personal goals and where everyone can succeed," Christianson said. "We hope it inspires others in the industry to push forward with their goals of becoming more diverse."

The effort to reach female ownership of a majority of the firm's shares began a decade ago, Christianson said, and continued as male shareholders transitioned into other statuses or retired. To advance the process, shareholders unanimously approved going from two classes of shares to one in a vote a couple of years ago.

"It has been a 100 percent cooperative effort between the men and the women in the firm," Christianson said.

While women made up slightly more than 54 percent of law school graduates in 2020, they made up only 21

percent of equity partners at U.S. law firms, NJL said, citing data from the American Lawyer, when it announced the certification last month.

NJL, founded in 1996, focuses on labor and employment, product liability litigation, business litigation, health care and corporate and transactional services.

“We’re a first-generation firm that has always attempted to exceed in diversity and intends to be independent,” Christianson said.

Joining the ranks of local certified women-owned firms is Stellpflug Law, which announced it had achieved certification on March 14.

“I represent a lot of large companies who have a lot of options for who they do business with,” founding partner Janet Stellpflug said. “If they’re choosing to do business with a woman-owned organization, they can trust that it’s not just somebody putting a face out front, that it’s legitimately a woman-owned business.”

The WBENC vetting process is rigorous, Stellpflug said. The organization reviews financial records and leases, does interviews and conducts a site inspection, with Stellpflug walking through her office with a laptop while guiding a virtual tour, apparently because of the pandemic.

Stellpflug, who launched the firm in July 2020, said earning the certification shows her support for other women-owned business. She focuses on litigation, which she said is male dominated, and representing clients in male-dominated industries — contractors in construction disputes and product manufacturers in product liability disputes.

“Those are industries that are trying to branch out into hiring more women, more female vendors,” Stellpflug said. “They’re looking not only for partnering with women-owned organizations but ones that are certified.”

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FOUNDING PARTNER OF
STELLPFLUG LAW PLLC

NJL’s women-owned certification came as a surprise. “They’re a huge firm,” Stellpflug said. “Historically since I’ve been practicing, those firms have been in the ownership structure dominated by men. That’s one of the reasons I started my own firm. ... It’s great news but it’s a long time coming.”

Stellpflug Law expects to gain a third attorney when a law clerk passes the bar exam, Stellpflug said.

Other certified women-owned law firms in Minnesota, all in Minneapolis, also are smaller, according to their websites and WBENC and NAMWOLF sites. Sapientia Law Group has 10 attorneys; Berens Miller, five; and Roe Law Group, three.