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Making the Case: Founder of Largest National Women-Owned U.S. Law Firm Fights Fair

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The highly anticipated fictional meet-up of powerhouse female lawyers Annalise Keating and Olivia Pope is setting *Shondaland* on fire with the attorney stars of TV's "How To Get Away With Murder" and "Scandal" cross-examining their plotlines.

But in real life, there are few women equity partners in big law firms able to make as big a splash.

Women holding equity partnerships in law firms was just 19 percent in 2016, according to the National Association of Women Lawyers' 2017 survey. It was only slightly up from 16 percent in 2008.

[Kelly Rittenberry Culhane](#) was out to change that. As co-founder and managing partner of [Culhane Meadows](#), the largest national full-service women-owned law firm in the country, Culhane and her team have expanded the Dallas-based firm to nearly 60 partners in seven cities, since its launch in 2013.



The Culhane Meadows' managing partners strive for fairness (L to R): Jim Meadows, Kim Verska, Heather Haughian, Grant Walsh, Kelly R. Culhane.

"I created Culhane Meadows to disrupt the way in which conventional law firms operate – which results in eradicating the harassment and other discriminatory issues that continue to plague corporate environments (and society in general)," Culhane says.

"From our very beginning we have sought to create an open and transparent platform where all lawyers can thrive regardless of gender, race, religion, age, or geography," she adds.

At Culhane Meadows, four of the top 10 earners are women, and the top earner is a woman. At the firm, that is "cloud-based," meaning attorneys can work virtually, 40 percent of its partners are women. Three of the five managing partners are women.

This is not the norm industry-wide where women non-equity partners account for 30 percent and women equity partners account for 19 percent, in spite of the reality that an almost equal number of women and men are hired at the associate level. Nearly half, or 47.6 percent of law school graduates in 2015 were women, according to the American Bar Association.

In total, women account for 34.6 percent of all lawyers who are members of the American Bar Association, or more than 101,000 female lawyers. In Fortune 500 companies, women account for 24.8 percent of general counsel positions, according to the Minority Corporate Counsel Association, November/ December 2016 report.

The disparities are something she has witnessed for all of her career. Graduating from Marquette University Law School in 1994, Culhane went to work for a large firm with offices in Dallas and Austin.

“I was in the litigation section working 100 hours per week,” she says. She saw other women at the firm sacrificed their personal lives to rise up in the firm, and she decided she was not going to do that.

“I did intentionally Mommy Track myself,” Culhane says, having three children in five years. “I was the only woman in an all-male trial section,” she explains. So there was not a lot of understanding or tolerance of work family balance.

That is not the case with Culhane Meadows. With cloud offices in Atlanta, Austin, Chicago, Dallas, Houston, New York, and Washington D.C., Culhane says the firm offers full service benefits without the cramped physical space of a single office in each city.

The firm is able to save on high downtown rentals, associate salaries and uses a transparent system of flat fees and negotiated rates instead of a system of billable hours. The lawyers “take 80 percent of what they earn home,” Culhane says.

“At the median, the typical female equity partner in the 200 largest firms earns 80 percent of the compensation earned by the typical male partner,” according to the 2015 Report of the Annual National Survey on Retention and Promotion of Women in Law Firms by the National Association of Women Lawyers.

With a system of flexible hours and virtual offices, “you don’t have to choose between family and career,” Culhane says. And this works well for women as well as men, some on the team who choose to take paternity leave.

“You can work from home whereas before you needed to hide it,” she says.

A system of equity partners and an advisory committee also eliminates a lot of politics and conflict, Culhane says. “There’s no perk for kissing up to an owner. We make financial decisions together and no one person has control.”

With these systems in place, Culhane says, “We have been able to attract talented women lawyers who have not been able to excel as easily in big law firms.”

In the era of #MeToo disclosures in all fields, this open culture is a welcome relief.

“We have eliminated the normal close quarters and compressed office space situations, and are comprised exclusively of senior partner-level attorneys so we don’t have the same environment of traditional Big Law where associates and staff may feel intimidated, harassed or threatened by superiors,” Culhane says.

A recent California case made headlines when a Sacramento lobbyist filed a lawsuit against her law firm saying she was fired for signing a public letter calling out sexual harassment.

“Alicia Lewis, 33, is one of the leaders of the ‘We Said Enough’ movement that kicked off Oct. 17 when she and more than 140 other women lobbyists, legislators, political consultants and public relations professionals penned the letter drawing attention to their collective experiences with harassment,” according to the Sacramento Bee.

This is a symptom of a legal culture where women are not treated fairly.

“U.S. law firms have long been overwhelmingly dominated by men, particularly at the partnership level, and Law360’s latest Glass Ceiling Report shows that recent progress has been — at best — only incremental,” according to Law360.

“Law firms continue to make only the smallest steps toward increasing the number of women in their ranks, Law360’s fourth annual headcount survey of more than 300 firms reveals, despite the fact that women have made up over 40 percent of law school students for more than three decades,” the report shows.

American Lawyer ranks the top 174 law firms in the U.S. for percentage of female equity partners, that ranges from 12 percent to 46.4 percent, with some firms decreasing, while others increase incrementally.

Culhane knows her firm is making a difference in a profession where change is slow to reach parity for women.

As a mother of a 12-year-old and 15-year-old (her oldest child passed away), Culhane says she is a football and soccer mom in addition to being an equity partner in a major national a law firm. And even with almost 60 partners, she says she is working more, not less. But she does have the life balance she hoped to create.

“For a lot of staff, associate and senior partners in large firms you’re forced to choose between being with your kids or being a successful equity partner with the firm. You shouldn’t have to choose,” Culhane says.

“I am so lucky at this firm to be able to practice law and I am also able to be very present in my children’s lives.”

Her ambition to expand the firm is balanced by the mission to offer an opportunity for men and women to have the law careers they want as well as the personal lives they intend to have.

“It goes well beyond the wish to get some more clients,” Culhane says. “It’s about trying to change it for women who want to be top earners and have a family.”

Note: The author’s post originally ran on [Take The Lead](#).

About Culhane Meadows – *Big Law for the New Economy*®

The largest woman-owned national full-service business law firm in the U.S., [Culhane Meadows](#) fields nearly 60 partners in seven offices across the country. Uniquely structured, the firm’s Disruptive Law® business model gives attorneys greater work-life flexibility while delivering outstanding, partner-level legal services to major corporations and emerging companies across industry sectors more efficiently and cost-effectively than conventional law firms. Clients enjoy exceptional and highly-efficient legal services provided exclusively by partner-level attorneys with significant experience and training from large law firms or in-house legal departments of respected corporations. *U.S. News & World Report* has named Culhane Meadows among the country’s “Best Law Firms” in its 2014 through 2018 rankings and many of the firm’s partners are regularly recognized in *Chambers*, *Super Lawyers*, *Best Lawyers* and *Martindale-Hubbell* Peer Reviews.