

LOS ANGELES

Daily Journal

www.dailyjournal.com

FRIDAY, JULY 1, 2016

COVER STORY

Walsworth recognized for its diversity

By Banks Albach
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Orange County-based WFBM LLP, better known as Walsworth, has been recognized by a nonprofit group for its high percentage of female equity partners.

The National Association of Minority & Women Owned Law Firms, or NAMWOLF, currently has roughly 150 law firm members, and announced the introduction of Walsworth, with more than 80 lawyers working in the city of Orange, Los Angeles and San Francisco, on Thursday.

Walsworth became one of the largest of the group's members.

Sixty percent of the team is female and 54 percent have an ownership stake. The firm opened in 1989.

Deidre Cohen Katz started with the firm 21 years ago as a second-year associate and is now an equity partner specializing in an array of business litigation defense.

She said the firm has had a gradual, yet dedicated, pursuit of diversification.

"Beyond just formalizing what we do, who we are and what we've been, this allows us to help a number of companies that are specifically looking for diverse law firms," she said. "With this membership they can now be introduced to us."

Joel Stern, CEO of NAMWOLF, said any firm applying to the trade association goes through an extensive vetting process that includes review by any of the hundreds of corporate counsel they work with and requires three references from Fortune 500 companies.

"Any firm that gets into NAMWOLF goes through an onerous acceptance process by in-house counsel," he said, mentioning that the Coca-Cola Co.'s legal department often takes part. "It's a great honor for these firms and means they are of very high caliber."

In-house counsel at a wide variety of companies have prioritized the hiring of

outside law firms that focus on creating a diverse workforce. Last year, for example, Microsoft Corp. announced it would assign a bonus of up to 2 percent of the legal fees billed to the companies for firms that demonstrated a commitment to increasing diversity in leadership roles.

Based on attorney headcount, Walsworth ranks third with NAMWOLF nationally, behind Quintairos, Prieto, Wood & Boyer PA and ROIG Lawyers, both of which are members based on ethnic minority membership.

Stern, who practiced for 14 years in-house with Accenture PLC, said NAMWOLF's pursuit is to introduce corporate attorneys with outside counsel. The Chicago-based nonprofit's annual event, which drew roughly 700 attendees in Hollywood last and is set for Sept. 14 in Houston, is their main networking opportunity.

"We bring in-house and law firms together," Stern said. "That's the part that in-house attorneys like the most."

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