



Writing Her Own Story

Deborah Read Is More About the Work Than Trailblazing as MP of Thompson Hine

BY STUART WARNER

This article was written because Deborah Z. Read, the new managing partner at Thompson Hine LLP, is the first woman to head a major law firm headquartered in Cleveland. But that wouldn't be the lead paragraph if Read, who once considered a career in journalism, were writing this story.

She wants to be remembered as more than a milestone. She wants to be remembered as the managing partner who made her firm the best it could be — for its clients and for its employees. The managing partner who teamed with clients to best achieve their objectives for

legal service delivery. The managing partner who also happens to be a woman.

She is more about the work than the public trailblazing.

"I didn't want to do this job for any other reason than it's a great challenge ... I want to do a great job for the firm," she said during a two-hour interview at Thompson Hine. "I am a driven person ... there's an internal drive that causes me to work very hard ... to want the very best from the work I perform. Now my goal is to translate that to really energizing the rest of the firm."

Still, Read recognizes that the "first woman" badge is not something she can hide. Others do, too.

Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Connie Schultz has worked with Read occasionally.

They are women of the same age, women of accomplishment. They were born one day apart — July 21 and 22 in 1957. They both were raised in working-class communities.

"You reach a point in your career where you hope others have stopped seeing you, first and foremost, as a woman, but for Deborah's and my generation, that's probably never going to happen," Schultz said. "She is at the top of her profession for all kinds of reasons that have nothing to do with her gender, but she's also still the rare woman in that position."

Until late last year, only nine of America's largest 200 law firms were headed by women. In December, Debbie Read became the 10th. Until the mid-1970s, law school remained primarily a male bastion. By 1993, however, more than

half the students in law school were women. But another two decades later, women stand mostly on the bottom rungs of the ladder. Nationally, only 18 percent of the partners at American law firms are female, only 16 percent at the top 200 firms, according to Catalyst, Inc.

So Read accepts that being a role model comes with the job.

"I acknowledge that I am viewed that way by many," she said. "It brings added responsibility. I feel people will be looking at me as the first female managing partner of a large firm headquartered in Cleveland. It makes me want to do an even better job."

But that's not what powers her "internal drive" — the drive that has motivated her since she was a child growing up in a home with two working parents, Andrew and Dolores Zider, in Greensburg, Pa.

"I don't think you can attribute it to any one person," Read said. "My mother is 93 and still does volunteer work for charity and drives her own car. She is the strongest moral compass I know. But she thought I should be a nurse, get married, have two kids and live in Greensburg, Pa., for the rest of my life. I knew I'd never do that. There wasn't any direct push. I just always knew it ... But who my parents were allowed me to think I could do more."

She went to Ohio University because of its reputation as a journalism school, but a political science professor, Felix Gagliano, told her she would be wasting her mind if she did not pursue a career as a lawyer.

She earned her law degree at Boston University in 1982, married another lawyer, John Read, and after a few years at a Washington firm, she followed him when he got an offering from a firm in Cleveland in 1986. She was hired as an associate at Thompson Hine.

Both marriages were a perfect fit for a woman professional. In John Read, a partner at Vorys, Sater, Seymour and Pease, she found a husband who was willing to share the parenting load 50/50 — "and sometimes 60/40 him," she said — after their daughter, Lucie, was born in 1992. At Thompson Hine, she found a culture that welcomed and encouraged women and minorities.

This year, for the fourth time, Thompson Hine was named to *Multicultural Law* magazine's list of top 100 law firms for women. Read's predecessor as managing partner, David Hooker, has been honored by the Cleveland Metropolitan Bar Association for championing diversity. Fifty percent of the firm's executive committee is comprised of women and minorities, double digits above the national average.

Read played a strong role in developing that culture, creating a Saturday childcare program at a time when working remotely was not feasible,

supporting the formation of the firm's nationally honored Spotlight on Women initiative, which nourishes female attorneys' careers with seminars, panel presentations and networking opportunities. Likewise, her career flourished in such an environment.

She became known as a lawyer who cared about her clients, most of them non-profits like the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, treating them as partners, not customers.

"I hate lawyer jokes," she said. "I take a lot of pride in delivering excellent service to clients. It's not just a job ... I want to see them achieve their objectives."

Her leadership skills also began to emerge. She was named to the firm's executive committee in 2001.

Steve Kaufman met Read when both were members of the Leadership Cleveland Class of 1999. He was managing partner of Kaufman & Cumberland Co. He said he saw the qualities then that would boost her to the top. "She was good at connecting with people and respecting them," he said. "She was clearly capable of building a consensus and drawing people to follow an idea."

Three years later, his smaller firm was merged into Thompson Hine and Read was negotiating the deal.

"She was tough ... we had our moments," said Kaufman, who remained with Thompson Hine until he started a new firm, Kaufman & Co., in January 2011. "There were some points ... that might have resulted in impasse ... but her skill at getting people to move to common ground" got the job done.

Hooker saw the same kind of qualities when she took over the firm's lateral hiring program, recruiting established lawyers to join Thompson Hine and integrating them into the fast-growing firm's seven offices. "Debbie is a person who strives for excellence," said Hooker, who has returned to client work. "She has a passion for making Thompson Hine the best place for people to work, to be part of."

Both men said there was no question she earned the managing partner job. And they both said they thought a woman would bring different qualities to the job than a man would. But neither could define exactly what those are.

When prompted, Read was more specific about women leaders.

"I don't like to generalize ... and you're always going to find outliers," she said, "but men tend to avoid interpersonal or HR conflict ... they want it to be over. Women are more comfortable dealing with and resolving it. Some men think they're giving the message, but it hasn't been clear or direct. Women tend to be more open about the message."

But she knows the challenges she faces are the same for either gender. During a difficult economy, clients are more circumspect about how they spend dollars. To that end, she said, the firm plans to partner with clients on service delivery models that embrace better project management, efficiency, predictability and some risk sharing.

"The economic downturn was a game-changer for the legal industry," she said. "We need to deliver services in a way that addresses client concerns. They want more value for their money."

That means offering services under different pricing arrangements, rather than billing by the hour and letting the meter run.

"We train our lawyers to engage in project management," she said. "Lawyers were taught to analyze a problem to death and bill the client for all the hours. But how much time it took was divorced from the value [to the client] of the answer. Those days are gone.

"The challenge now is to have a cost that equates to the value to the client of arriving at the solution."

She looked comfortable as she talked about new directions for the firm. Then the gender issue was raised again. Why did it take more than a century for a woman to take command of a major law firm headquartered Cleveland? She paused before answering.

"I would like to give [all the firms] the benefit of the doubt and say that they selected the best person for the job," she said, "and that didn't happen to be a woman. And remember the pool of women from that population [of potential managing partners] was significantly lower."

However, she noted, "I believe our commitment to diversity allowed gender and race to be a non-issue in selection of the managing partner."

That would be a quiet, but solid, ending to this story — the way she might write it herself. Schultz and others believe, however, that Read will have a much more dramatic impact on the legal community before her final chapter is written.

"My interactions with Deborah assure me that she is doing all she can to make sure there are more women like her in the future," Schultz said. "That may be her greatest legacy: She's not just knocking down obstacles; she's forging a clear path for the women who follow her, and she's reaching back to pull them along."



Stuart Warner, president of *The Write Coach* consulting company, was named Ohio's best freelance writer in 2010 and 2012. He previously worked as writing coach at *The Plain Dealer*, where he edited the columns of Pulitzer-winner Connie Schultz and Pulitzer-finalist Regina Brett. He can be reached at (330) 342-5610 or warnercorn@aol.com.