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Lawyers busting the glass ceiling

Premium content from Portland Business Journal - by Andy Giegerich , Business Journal staff writer

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Legal Services

When Janet Hoffman earned her law degree in the late 1970s, she interviewed for a position with a prominent downtown Portland law firm.

Hoffman, who went on to practice criminal defense law, didn't make the cut.

"They said at the time they would never have any women litigators," said Hoffman, who steadfastly refused to name the firm but said it remains a powerhouse law office today. "Since that time, they've had many women litigators. Today, no firm would ever say that. But the fact that it could even be said out loud back then says a lot."

Plenty has changed since Hoffman's interview. Myriad statistics suggest that women now comprise one-third of all attorneys. Nearly half of all law school graduates are women. And more Oregon women are receiving statewide honors as tops in their field.

For example, more Portland female attorneys than ever placed in the top 50 among Super Lawyers magazine's list of leading Oregon attorneys. Seven Oregon women, including Hoffman, landed in the top 50 this year. That's up from five in 2010 and three during both 2009 and 2008.

The list acknowledges attorneys who have earned respect from their peers, meet ethical standards and have achieved documentable standards of excellence.

While the slowly increasing number of Oregon women on the list suggests progress, seven out of 50, or 14 percent, hardly reflects the percent of women in the U.S. population.

The list's structure may result from a combination of demographics. On the one hand, law office rosters include more females, but on the other hand, the length of their careers to date may be relatively short.

"Most people who end up on that list do so after practicing for a long time," said Teresa Pearson, a **Miller Nash** corporate bankruptcy attorney who's making her second appearance on the Super Lawyers list. "More women have entered the practice of law in the last 20 or 30 years, so there are more who are at that point where they're recognized for their excellent careers."

The figures of women in the field overall are expected to rise nationally and locally. Some 47 percent of all first-year law students nationally in 2009 were women. And 51 percent of all judicial clerkships offered to top graduating students in 2009 — at federal, state and local levels — were offered to women.

However, women continued to trail their male counterparts in terms of salary. The average male lawyer made \$1,934 a week in 2009, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Women attorneys made \$1,449, or 74.9 percent of what their male colleagues made. Again, the length of time that most women have practiced could affect those numbers.

Female attorney salaries have jumped by 35 percent since 2002, compared to a 25 percent hike for men during the same period.

Oregon's female "Super Lawyers" say as they've climbed their industry's ladder, they've always had a deep cache of both male and female colleagues.

"There's definitely been a change since the early '70s, when women attorneys told me there might only be a couple of other women in their class," said **Jane Paulson**, of Portland-based **Paulson Coletti** Trial Attorneys PC. "I graduated in 1987, and our class was 50-50 men and women.

"The more women who are in the profession, clearly, it makes it easier for other women. When I started practicing, I'd go to hearings where I was the only woman in the room. Now, I've been in trials where everyone in the courtroom was a woman."

The 40-year-old Pearson said she seldom faces gender issues.

"It's pretty rare that I run into any kind of discrimination or issues that arise because of the fact that I'm female," she said.

Most firms, she said, strive to add diversity to their practices in all forms, including gender mix, racial and ethnic mix and attorneys who are in sexual orientation minorities.

Pearson added that **Miller Nash** has no "glass ceiling" that prohibits women from becoming partners or assuming other top law firm roles.

"I've always felt that people who have done good work have been rewarded regardless of background or gender," she said. "When you look at our management structure, there are women on our compensation and education committees. I've never felt there have been barriers here."

Still, the National Association of Women Lawyers reports that only 27 percent of the average firm's non-equity partners (and only 16 percent of equity partners) are women.

Paulson might have an explanation.

"It's not because they're not qualified; a lot of it is they end up leaving the profession for one reason or another," she said.

Women among Oregon's top 50 "super lawyers"

- **Courtney Angeli** Buchanan Angeli Altschul & Sullivan LLP.
- **Paula A. Barran** Barran Liebman LLP.
- **Carol J. Bernick** Davis Wright Tremaine LLP.
- **Janet Lee Hoffman** Janet Hoffman & Associates LLC.
- **Jane Paulson Paulson Coletti** Trial Attorneys PC.
- **Teresa H. Pearson Miller Nash** LLP.
- **Ruth E. Pekelder** Pekelder Family Law PC.