

Week of August 3-9, 2012

LAW & ACCOUNTING **FOCUS**

# LEADING LADIES

Women reign at top of Houston law and accounting firms

## Chris LaFollette

Partner-in-charge  
Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP

YEARS AT COMPANY: 8

LEADS: 50 lawyers

TIME IN CURRENT POSITION: Four years, six months

PREVIOUS POSITION: Partner, energy and global transactions

EDUCATION: J.D. from Loyola Law School in Los Angeles; Bachelor's from  
The University of Texas at Austin

.....  
"Go for it — it can be done. I was 40 when I had my second child. But you've got to stop and pause and count your blessings. I think while being a partner isn't the only thing one should do, I think it is an opportunity I'd like to see more women pursue."



PHOTOS BY ERIC KAYNE/HBJ

## RISING TO THE TOP

Private sector shows greater diversity in high-level positions at Houston law and accounting firms

BY DEON DAUGHERTY  
HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Supporting a smart navy blue power suit and thin bow tie fashionable for professional women in 1980, lawyer **Christine "Chris" LaFollette** was often asked by male opposing counsel to fetch them a cup of coffee or direct them to the conference room.

"As we went into negotiations (they) would feel really bad, but I had to rise above those kinds of things to focus on what's important — the opportunity to have a seat at the table," said LaFollette, who is partner-in-charge of the Houston office of **Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP**, based in Washington, D.C.

Only 3 percent of firms on *HBJ's* 2012 Top 100 Public Companies list name a woman as a top executive, but experts say the private sector touts greater diversity at the top. Seven percent of the 50 firms on *HBJ's* lists of the largest law and accounting firms name a woman as a top executive.

"I still don't believe nearly enough women are at

the top (when looking at) the number of woman CEOs or board directors," said Anne Taylor, vice president and managing partner for accounting firm Deloitte LLP.

Steve Newton, area manager of the Houston office of Russell Reynolds Associates, an executive search and assessment firm based in New York, said he's noticed when he conducts board member searches, greater diversity is often found in professional services.

"They're meritocracies, and they've done a very good job of reaching out," he said.

Public companies would probably like to do the same thing, he said, but candidates may tend to go where they've already seen diverse candidates become successful.

"I truly believe it all goes back to what you define as success. For many, it may not be about becoming a partner or senior associate. There's no sense in persevering for a goal that, at the end of the day, you don't want," said Shauna Johnson Clark, partner-in-charge of the Houston law office of Fulbright & Jaworski LLP.

The business community is learning, experts say, that diversity in employees' age, gender and race can bring critical new perspectives toward recipes for success.

### EDUCATION

The child of two South Texas educators, Akin Gump's LaFollette learned early that education was crucial. She grew up in Brownsville, with no air conditioning, and by the time she was 6, she had figured out that picking cotton wasn't for her.

LaFollette began her career as a junior high history teacher. Being an educator taught her how to get along in the corporate world, she said.

"It was a great experience in learning how to deal with different perspectives, different views and getting people to focus," LaFollette said.

Deloitte's Taylor was one of two women in her graduating class at Princeton University's doctorate engineering program in the late 1970s. She had worked very hard to be at the top of her class, she said, and she believed opportunities came along based on

# RISING TO THE TOP

merit. As it turned out, sometimes opportunities were also based on networking and timing, she said.

"I had always thought there was a big scoreboard with your GPA and credentials," said Taylor, who found out opportunities are not laid out in such clearly enumerated terms.

"I think that's something everybody learns over time, and navigating in that environment is something that everyone needs to understand."

## MENTORS

It was the men in Taylor's life — her father, brothers and husband — who were critical sources of support for her goals, she said.

In particular, one male supervisor, who might not have otherwise been described as particularly enlightened, she said, never assumed he knew how she would respond to an opportunity based on being a woman.

"My biggest frustration is that women limit themselves," she said. "They look ahead and assume they can't get things done or won't have (the) opportunity to create balance," said Taylor. "I'm frustrated that such talented women often limit themselves."

Mentors also helped Fulbright's Clark work past the isolation she sometimes felt as one of a few women in the field.

"Much of that was due to my youth and, at the time, immaturity," said Clark. "In those days, I thought I needed a mentor to look just like me. I soon learned I would have the best mentor in a 65-year-old Italian-American man, Robert Bambace," said Clark, who has been at the helm of the No. 2 firm on HBJ's Largest Houston-Area Law Firms list for more than a year.

LaFollette said her success was assisted by a team which included an understanding husband and male mentors.

But, there were also women who supported her, she said, including her sister and colleagues.

"I have female colleagues who were supportive. You often hear that women don't support other women. I have not found that to be the case; if anything, it's the exception, not the rule. And if that happens, it happens with men, too," LaFollette said.

It was a woman who encouraged Niloufar Molavi to consider work at the accounting firm of New York-based PricewaterhouseCoopers U.S., where she is

now the top Houston executive. Partners and senior managers took her under their wings, she said.

"I believe strongly that to be successful and get your career to move in the direction you want, you need to have strong sponsorship within the organization — it doesn't matter who you are," said Molavi, who is the U.S. energy leader and market managing partner of PricewaterhouseCoopers, the second-largest Houston-area accounting firm.

More important, she said, when leaders are willing to mentor young professionals, offer them opportunities and stake their reputation on the outcome, it's up to the mentees to take advantage of those opportunities.

Molavi said she learned lessons early in life that have benefitted her as a leader.

Born in Iran, Molavi fled to France in 1980 after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. She had to come to grips with leaving some family, friends and her culture behind. When her family moved to Houston, she made the transition all over again. The experience likely made being the only woman in the boardroom less daunting, she said.

"It taught me how to adapt and get comfortable dealing with change," Molavi said. "Of course, as I was going through all of that, I never thought of it as a positive. As a teenager, you're miserable at the time, but I found later on, as we rolled out new initiatives or dealt with changes in the regulatory environment, I was a lot more open and comfortable with that change. I embraced it because I knew that change is not always a negative thing. If you use it to your advantage, you will ultimately see the benefits coming out of it."

## TECHNOLOGY

One of the most important changes in the workplace for women has been the acceptance of technology that allows a work-life balance not available in previous generations.

"I can't speak for men, but for me and other women essentially, technology has allowed women to achieve that work-life balance," said Clark.

"When we first started without email and the ability to work remotely, we were all chained to our desks. It was a forced march. You got to the office early, and you stayed late, and every weekend was at the office.

The expectations have not changed in the practice of law. The downside, in fact, we are expected to be even more available. Women lawyers are working just as hard as we did then, but we don't have to make the sacrifices women made 20 or 30 years ago, (in regards to) quality of life and having a family.

"I have the ability to work from home as if I'm working in the office. I can start working, send email and review documents at 5 a.m., but I don't have to leave my family at 5 in the morning," Clark said. "That's no small thing."

"Technology has brought such a flexibility to scheduling that we didn't have years ago. When I think about the path blazed by some of the women at the firm 30 years ago, I just sit back in awe," she said.

Deloitte's Taylor said technology has been a mixed blessing.

"Technology has made life much better for all of us. Working more virtually is a huge advantage, but I (have) discovered that it can be hard to put away the work," she said.

Molavi said that when women begin having children, they often reassess their ambitions.

"Unfortunately, they believe they can only be a great parent or have a very successful career," Molavi said. "I would tell them that's not true."

As Taylor prepares her three daughters to enter the workforce, she has some frustrations about women climbing the corporate ladder.

"(Women) don't rise to the most senior roles at the pace, nor in the numbers, you would expect by now, given how many enter and stay in business," she said.

Compared with public companies, professional services firms may be trying a bit harder to implement programs to lure diverse candidates with programs and other initiatives, but they're not having great success, said Amanda Brady, director of The Alexander Group, a Houston-based executive search firm.

"If you're looking simply at percentages of how many woman lawyers there are and how many make partner, it's still a very small percentage," she said.

Still, as more women enter the workforce and organizations embrace more flexibility, women are commanding more space in the C-suite, LaFollette said.

"Stereotypes are fading away in that sense, for the benefit of everyone moving forward," she said.