

# BRED IN THE BONE

It's becoming a tradition in Kim Koopersmith's family to enter the legal profession, but that doesn't mean they're focused on professional success—their priority has always been devotion to the unit. No surprise, then, that as she broke through barriers in her field, she found a way to make law firms more flexible and family-friendly.

BY CHANTAL BRAGANZA

Kim Koopersmith keeps many files in her office at the international law firm where she works. Most of them are not surprising: strategy reports, client profiles, updates from the 20 global offices she oversees at the firm, Akin Gump. But what might surprise a visitor are the files of recipes the mother of two keeps as well.

"We were known as the crazy family because my kids would generally eat at 8:30 or 9:00 pm," says Kim, explaining that was the only time she could join them. Before the workday was over, her kids would email their requests: "Rib-eye steaks and potato galette tonight, n'est-ce pas?" For a weeknight dinner?

"It's actually not that hard!" Kim insists. "The potatoes take a little time, but you can get it out."

## A foundation was set at home

That emphasis on family meals when raising her own daughters, one of whom now works as a lawyer, just like her mother and grandfather, was an element Kim borrowed from her own upbringing. Kim's mother died in a car accident when she was 12 and one of the first things her father did afterwards was learn to cook; making dinner every night with his kids was how he carved out dedicated family time for Kim and her two siblings. "Having a common time that we'd spend together and talk, whether it was politics or what we were doing the next weekend—I remember that warmly," she says. "My father was a role model as a lawyer, but he was also a role model as a parent who managed to raise three creatures by himself who all turned out quite well."

Kim's mother was also an inspiration. A school librarian, she had been studying in the evenings to pursue a master's degree before she died. Kim still has memories of watching her mother write essays at her bedroom card table in the evenings.

"It was the sixties, and I think she was right at that place where women were starting to think about if there was more that they wanted to do with their lives," she says. "There was an industriousness that was definitely part of what I took away from." Later on, Kim would apply a similar industriousness to helping young legal professionals fulfill their dreams without sacrificing home life.



Kim Koopersmith, first female Chair of Akin Gump, New York City.



### Bringing values to the value proposition

In the mid-eighties, Kim came out of law school with a not-uncommon notion amongst recent grads. “I thought I was going to change the world, of course,” she says with a bit of a laugh. “It was a surprise that I didn’t end up in the public interest sector.”

Instead, Kim went to work in litigation at a large corporate firm. Forgoing the public sector, it turns out, didn’t preclude her from becoming a catalyst for women’s advancement. Only the fourth person to hold the position of chair at the near-70-year-old firm Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP, Kim is the first woman to take on the role there, and one of relatively few women to hold a top managerial role at any large U.S. law firm. (According to the American Bar Association, only four percent of managing-partner spots at the 200 biggest American law firms were held by women in 2013.)

Well before being tapped for chair, Kim had set herself apart as an agent of change at Akin Gump. In her near two decades at the 850-lawyer firm, she established herself as a leader in promoting diversified workforces and flexible work schedules for new parents.

Kim worked as an attorney at New York-based Anderson Kill & Olick for about 10 years before joining Akin Gump—she took two six-month leaves after each of her daughters was born during this time. “Before I joined Akin Gump, I was working four days a week. I had a two-year-old and a seven-year-old at the time,” she says. “I felt very much like I wanted to not be working on a full-time basis, but also that I was not prepared to stay at home,” she says.

In making the switch to Akin Gump, she negotiated the same shortened work week. “There were not a lot of other people doing this,” she says of the arrangement—even into the nineties, flexible work week policies for new parents at big law firms were rare. Kim was asked to be the main relationship partner with one of Akin’s top clients, a media company going through a labour dispute. Her success with the client while working part-time inspired the firm’s then-chair to ask her to oversee the creation of a standardized flexible schedule program. In 2002, the program launched; today, nearly 120 lawyers have participated in it, taking the option to either work fewer days a week, or shorter days.

### The business argument

“I think we made a good case for why this was good for the law firm, as a retention tool and a good business tool,” says Kim, pointing to how flexible work policies like this keep turnover down and allow employees to work towards both family and career goals at the same time. “There were a lot of women who were doing really well, and we wanted them to stay in the firm.” She also notes that her experience of working four days a week for her first three years at the company (she moved back to full-time when both kids were in school) was very much a give-and-take. “You do need to recognize that there are limitations and, frankly, some instances where other people on the team are pitching in to cover the time that you’re not available.”

The give-and-take system also works best, she says, when as many people as possible are given concrete chances to prove themselves. “The single most important aspect of keeping a diverse workforce is making sure that opportunities are provided for everyone to shine and excel,” she says. She points to the leadership opportunities she was offered—and ardently took up—prior to becoming chair as examples.

### What she’ll leave behind

After piloting the setup of the reduced workload program, Kim took on the role of hiring partner at Akin Gump’s New York offices, and later landed a spot on the firm’s executive committee. Under both titles, she took the lead on implementing progressive and diversity-focused employment and professional development programs.

One of the largest is the Women’s Professional Development Initiative, which Kim has led since 2002. The initiative has since seen the launch of programs such as a mentorship curriculum and a leadership conference involving seminars, networking events and development training. She has also led hiring strategies to promote workforce diversity in other forms, from establishing law school scholarships at New York University that offer tuition assistance and guaranteed placement in the firm’s summer associate program, to leading the firm’s participation in Sponsors for Educational Opportunity, which places new law students from underserved communities in summer internships.

In 2008, Kim was promoted to U.S. Managing Partner of the firm, and the late 2012 announcement of her ascension to chair of Akin Gump gathered plenty of media attention from outlets such as Bloomberg and the *Washington Post*.

“The discussion on who’d be the next chair had very little to do with the fact that I was a woman. It was about skills and strategy and direction,” she told the *Washington Post* about it last September, noting that she was at least a little surprised that much of the press her promotion received at the time focused on her gender. “It’ll be great when a woman elected to run a large law firm is not newsworthy.”