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At firms big and small, Berkeley Law alumni rise to the leadership challenge.

BY GWYNETH K. SHAW

Anna Elento-Sneed '83 snagged a dream opportunity just a few years after graduating from Berkeley Law: The chance to work at one of the oldest law firms in her native Hawaii.

The labor and employment lawyer jumped at it — only to find the iconic firm too slow and hidebound for her tastes. A second, newer firm still felt stodgy, at least in terms of adopting technologies that could make practice easier and more effective.

“So I decided, ‘Well, I’ll just have to do it,’” Elento-Sneed says. “I took the whole department with me and set up this firm.”

That firm, ES&A, now boasts seven attorneys — including her two daughters — attracting clients with a full suite of services that often range far beyond legal advice. The firm bridges physical distance and belies its small size with various tech tools, from AI analysis of contracts to making the most of virtual and cloud-based connections.

“We’re much more collaborative than the typical law firm, and partner with different professions for large projects to help clients work through things,” Elento-Sneed says. “We ask clients, ‘What do you want? What do you need help with?’ We can bring in non-legal professionals like accountants, PR people, whatever they need to reach their goal.

“It’s a much more dynamic kind of operation and a very different way of practicing law — challenging and always interesting.”

Elento-Sneed didn’t leave Berkeley Law envisioning herself as the head of a firm. But, like other alumni law firm leaders,

she's found deep fulfillment in pushing the boundaries of what firms should look like, do, and aspire to.

Across the country and around the world, Berkeley Law grads are captaining firms through some of the most turbulent waters in decades. *Transcript* spoke with four of them about how law school guided their path, what it's like at the top of an organization, and how the turmoil wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic might shape firms of the future.

Changing big law culture, one lawyer at a time

Mitch Zuklie '96 went straight from law school into the heady space of Silicon Valley's startup culture in the go-go late 1990s. He's brought that same spirit to Orrick, where he is now chairman and CEO, and its stable of more than 1,100 lawyers in two dozen offices worldwide.

"Leading a law firm, or leading any organization that's

fundamentally talent-driven, is all about creating a sense of purpose, meaning, and connection," he says. "It's important that your team knows how that aligns with where they personally want to go. That's what ultimately, I think, causes people to want to stay at an organization."

Zuklie says the tumult of the past two years, from the pandemic to America's racial justice reckoning, has further driven home that how we act matters, as individuals and collectively. He's tried to push Orrick's culture in new directions to help clients, staff, and even the legal profession itself.

"We're really mindful that the current generation of folks in law school are very skeptical about big law and partnership," he says.

Surveys show roughly a third of law students, and even fewer current associates, want to become a firm partner. To make partnership more attractive, Zuklie says firms must create meaningful experiences for their lawyers, including

(cont. on p. 24)



Two Valley Titans Reflect

Larry Sonsini '66 and James McManis '67 overlapped at Berkeley Law, and on a good day you can drive between their Silicon Valley firms in under 30 minutes. But their experiences have been far different.

Sonsini, a founding partner of Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati in Palo Alto, is a renowned titan in the corporate governance world and his firm has shepherded some of the Valley's biggest IPOs and deals. McManis has been a

OUT IN FRONT: For decades, James McManis '67 (left) and Larry Sonsini '66 have deftly wrangled with legal issues emerging from the tech industry's exponential growth.



BY DESIGN:
Anna Elento-Sneed '83 cultivated a physical office plan — and culture — to maximize flexibility and morale at her Honolulu firm.

different kind of entrepreneur, building a successful litigation firm, McManis Faulkner, that he jokingly refers to as “a little mom and pop business here in San Jose” — the Shire to Wilson Sonsini’s Mordor.

Despite their divergent paths, both have enjoyed a front-row seat to the tech industry’s explosive growth and all the issues it has raised, from patents and intellectual property to how to manage artificial intelligence.

“You want to build a law firm with an eye on sustainability, and I think it all begins with culture,” Sonsini says. “We focused a lot on entrepreneurialism, diversity, and commitment to a particular plan, which was really to serve the technology industry, while emphasizing a culture of autonomy at the same time.

“That’s been our perspective from an early startup phase to an established law firm (now 17 offices across five countries with about 950 lawyers).

When we started 56 years ago, we had to really build on basic principles, and we’re still doing that today.”

McManis, who founded his firm with his wife (a UC Berkeley alumna) running the business side, likens hanging his own shingle to diving into the deep end of a pool.

“You’ve got to hold your nose and jump in, and if you’re going to be successful, you have to work, work, work,” he says. “My wife and I work seven days a week. You’ve got to be an entrepreneur and a risk-taker, and you’ve got to surround yourself with very good people.

“It’s very satisfying as a firm leader to take your values — what I think are good values, anyway — and pass those on to other lawyers. I think I’ve raised a lot of good lawyers.”

With the technology industry becoming a linchpin of society, Sonsini says, companies are increasingly disruptive as the pace of innovation accelerates. He

foresees both the legal and regulatory spheres continuing to ascend in influence — and careful thinking and cooperation being more important than ever.

“I think we can improve our society with it, but there are going to be times that are even more challenging,” Sonsini says. “I think we’re seeing some of that today.”

While Sonsini and McManis are able to reflect on what they’ve built over more than five decades, they also remain highly engaged. Their commitment to Berkeley Law (both have received the annual Citation Award, the school’s highest honor), the practice of law, and propelling Silicon Valley’s legal landscape remains unwavering.

“People say, ‘Jim, get a life!’” McManis says. “And I reply, ‘I’ve got the best life imaginable.’”

— *Gwyneth K. Shaw*

OPEN MIND: For Orrick Chairman and CEO Mitch Zuklie '96, pushing beyond conventional wisdom is integral to his leadership style.



opportunities to further a balance between their work and home lives — and follow their passions inside their jobs.

“The most important thing I do is try hard to be an innovator in workplace culture, to make it so people are attracted to us and want to stay with us,” he says.

Zuklie has also worked to help Orrick, and the profession in general, diversify its ranks. In 2020, Orrick launched its Racial, Social & Economic Justice Fellowship Program, which sends lawyers to work with social justice organizations for a year at their firm salary. Orrick has pledged to fund five fel-

Flying Solo to Exciting New Peaks

es, Ruky Tijani '14 is a lawyer. And a trademark specialist. And an entrepreneur.

But really, as the founder of Firm for the Culture, she's an elevation expert.

Vaulting social entrepreneurs to a place where they can benefit society. Lifting up small businesses tangled in legal quagmires. Raising the status and number of diverse company founders.

“We help clients avoid legal pitfalls when engaging in social impact initiatives, such as creating innovative ways to provide affordable access to healthcare and devising procedures to

increase voter participation, and changing the world in other meaningful ways,” Tijani says. “I’m proud to have a team combining social impact, intellectual property, tech, and creativity to make this happen.”

Firm for the Culture offers trademark, brand protection, and brand strategy services. It also provides low-cost legal education courses to diverse communities and social impact founders in exchange for clients' purchase of its services, much in the way TOMS® Shoes provides free shoes for people in need in exchange for each purchase.

After working as an associate at Quinn Emanuel in Silicon Valley, Tijani

struck out on her own.

“I wanted to help diverse clients who were changing the world but couldn't afford my services at the hourly rate Quinn provided,” she explains.

Using a flat fee model that allows clients to feel comfortable sharing their stories and experiences without fearing a huge invoice after their sessions, Tijani helps them succeed in both their business goals and internal operations. She also follows up with them about their lived experiences, not simply their legal matters.

During the pandemic, when a client who usually replied quickly to email lagged in responding, she reached out and learned that one of the client's closest family members had died from COVID-19.

“When I heard this, I did not think twice about scheduling a client session at no additional cost. Essentially, the

lows in each of the next three years.

Fellow Max Carter-Oberstone, an associate in Orrick's San Francisco office Supreme Court and Appellate Practice, recently joined the San Francisco Police Commission after a stint at New York University's Race and Policing Project.

"That's exactly what we want people to be able to do with this program," Zuklie says. "It strengthens our firm, allows us to add talent and a great partnership, and makes us more relevant to our community, which is awesome."

Another partnership, with an alternative legal services provider focused on innovative talent management solutions, aims to expand access to the firm's ranks.

"If we're going to change the way our profession looks, we need to find a way to identify talent from a much larger pool — and then make sure we're

client and I spent the session discussing ways the client could engage in self-care," Tijani says. "In the end, the client not only successfully registered their trademark, but also took time to work on healing so they could be a better business owner."

Tijani oversees a paralegal and other team members who handle daily operations, and outsources staffing help for bookkeeping, updating systems, and related functions. A 2021 Tory Burch Fellow, she says she's getting the help needed to scale her business exponentially without diminishing the quality of its offerings.

For Tijani, "Having clients who truly trust us is what makes this work so meaningful." — *Andrew Cohen*

STEPPING OUT:

Ruky Tijani '14 leaned on her training and intuition in launching Firm for the Culture.



SOUND STRATEGY:

Daralyn Durie '92, who won three major trials over the second half of 2021, says law firms “have a lot to learn from businesses.”



investing in that larger pool with resources that enable folks to meet their potential and succeed,” he says. “Every day, we’re rethinking our talent model and trying to learn from what other great firms and other great clients are doing.”

Great litigating makes good business

Within a few days of starting law school, Andrés Rivero '86 knew he wanted to be a litigator, thanks largely to the inspiring teaching of renowned Professor Caleb Foote.

“Foote was just a legend. I immediately knew I wanted to do criminal litigation, I wanted to be a federal prosecutor, I wanted to try cases,” Rivero says. “And I did everything you could do in law school to get there.”

That included Berkeley Law’s Moot Court team and James Patterson McBaine Honors Moot Court Competition (he was a finalist but still smarts over not winning), an internship in the San Francisco U.S. Attorney’s Office, and a spring break program through the National Institute of Trial Advocacy.

After law school, Rivero thought about staying in California, or moving to New York. But ultimately, he chose to go home to Miami and his Cuban-American roots.

It turned out to be a smart choice: Between drug trafficking and white-collar crime, 1980s Miami was a federal prosecutor’s dream. After a couple years at a big Florida firm, Rivero

got his coveted job as an Assistant U.S. Attorney in the Southern District of Florida.

After another round at the big firm, he realized that he still loved trying cases, but wanted to do it in a more streamlined, nimble way. He and a partner opened Rivero Mestre in 1998; the firm now has 20 attorneys in Miami and New York.

“I just love having my own law firm,” Rivero says. “It’s strictly litigation, and I still enjoy it. We just finished a federal jury trial that lasted six weeks, and it’s still as much fun as it was when I was 26.”

Over the years, his firm has built a strong stable of clients in Central America, South America, and Florida. Recently, Rivero Mestre began litigating cryptocurrency cases, including a \$600 million suit involving Bitcoin’s inventor that required four years of intense litigation.

“One huge advantage of being in a small setting is that we can do what’s essentially bespoke litigation,” Rivero says. “We’re extremely agile — we changed our model four times in 13 years. We’re willing to turn on a dime.

“I think the most important thing is knowing what you’re about. That lets you shift rapidly when you need to.”

Rivero Mestre is stocked with Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking lawyers, a big cultural advantage in South Florida and Latin and South America. The firm also tossed the

practice of laying out billable hour requirements, which are commonplace at bigger firms.

“I know we’re never going to motivate people with a requirement,” Rivero says. “Without one, we’re really focused on being as efficient as possible for the client.”

With Florida’s regulations potentially changing to allow non-lawyers to run firms, he anticipates another shift in his market. Lean and nimble is a prime position for success, Rivero says — just as smaller animals outlasted the giant creatures of bygone eras.

“I think there will be dinosaurs and there will be rodents,” he says. “I hope to be one of the rodents.”

Designed for maximum impact

The flexibility Rivero prizes also worked in Elento-Sneed’s favor. When she set up ES&A, she went for an office plan that prioritized flexibility, both within the physical space and for employees.

“I wanted to make sure we could have true work-life balance,” she says. “We used technology so that if, for example, you needed to stay home because your kid is sick, you could actually just log in from home and work once the kid was asleep. The technology means that we’re not limited to only being in the office.”

The office itself is a Silicon Valley-style plan, with conference rooms for client meetings and more free-flowing “islands” of bench-like stations for the rest of the time. When the pandemic hit, Elento-Sneed says, “all that happened is we went home.”

“It was pretty seamless, because it’s a setup we were already using,” she says. “The flexible model is great not just for the younger lawyers — it works for the older ones as well, because they have to care for elderly parents.

“It really does increase productivity. You can concentrate when you need to, and if that means you’re working at 1 in the morning, that’s your schedule. Clients know we’ll work hard for them, and everyone in the firm understands how to do that.”

Small firm, big influence

Like many of the other leaders, Daralyn Durie ’92 didn’t set out to lead a firm.

“The founding came first and the leadership came second,” she says of Durie Tangri, her San Francisco-based intellectual property firm. “We were a group of Berkeley alums who had gone to law school together, and thought it’d be really fun to start a firm together.”

After Durie Tangri was born, Durie and her colleagues started “thinking hard about what a law firm in the 2000s should be.” They borrowed ideas from the startup culture that both surrounded them and forged the core of their patent and intellectual property business.

The ability to start from scratch, without the trappings of a legacy firm, gave them options ranging from the decidedly mundane (no paper file room) to a then-unusual law firm office plan (tiny offices to force collaboration).

How the firm was organized, physically and conceptually, became part of its business model.

“I think law firms have a lot to learn from businesses, including how you invest people in an enterprise and get them to think about their careers contextually,” Durie says. “I feel like a lot of lawyers in more conventional firm settings really think about what they’re doing in a relatively siloed way.”

By contrast, she says, “How we felt when we started is partially because we were all longtime friends. There was a stable



AGILITY 101: Miami lawyer Andrés Rivero ’86 links the success of his firm to its adaptability and willingness “to turn on a dime.”

base there to allow us to think about things in a slightly more exploratory way, and to follow the impulse to do things differently — break the model a little bit.

“That became its own leadership piece.”

There was a learning curve, Durie admits, because the skills that make a great lawyer and the skills of a great leader often seem fundamentally in conflict. A lawyer works to persuade, she says — a jury, a judge, a client — but in pursuit of a decision, rather than a more in-depth analysis.

“At a law firm, you want people to make investments in the firm and in themselves, and figure out how to be the best lawyer they can be. That’s really a much more multi-dimensional thing about the kind of person they want to be, the kind of professional they want to be,” Durie says. “And that requires understanding people’s motivations and desires in a much deeper way.”

Boutique firms like Durie Tangri, which has three dozen lawyers, can offer students an alternative to what some see as a binary choice between private practice and public interest law. Durie, who teaches at Berkeley Law and spends a lot of time with students, says they don’t have to make such a stark choice when smaller firms offer opportunities.

“There are plenty of firms out there, like ours to some extent, where people have made a pretty explicit set of choices and profit maximization isn’t the main driver of their professional life,” Durie says. “You’ve got to interrogate what it is that you want, both in terms of money and what you love to do.”

Parsing the future

These leaders move toward the next horizon — establishing what post-pandemic norms will look like and which temporary adjustments may become permanent. Some will center on flexible or remote work, Rivero says, as employees realize they can live outside of traditional big law hubs.

“That’s something I think young people should consider,” he says. “I love New York, it’s a fantastic city. But there are other cities that are going to be very important in the future.”

Other lessons are more philosophical. Both Durie and Zuklie say law firms have a lot to learn from entrepreneurs about experimenting with new ideas and collaboration. Teamwork is something they took away from their time at Berkeley Law, and continue to emphasize.

“No one individually leads a law firm — it’s definitely a collection of people,” Zuklie says. “I feel really lucky that I do it with an extraordinary group of folks who are fun to work with every day, trying to do incredibly great work for clients, and trying to leave the organization stronger than when we inherited it.

“The most important skill for a leader is listening. And that’s what we try to do.”

Three’s Company

They heard all the warnings: Don’t mix work and friends. Don’t start your own firm without ample experience. Don’t offer new hires too much flexibility.

So how have former Berkeley Law roommates Ryan Shaening Pokrasso, Hash Zahed, and David De La Flor flourished at SPZ Legal? By ignoring them.

“Having these strong friendships that



predate the firm allows for more honest conversations,” De La Flor says. “We all truly want nothing but the best for each other. When you’re growing a business together, knowing you have that support behind you is invaluable.”

After graduating in 2013, Shaening Pokrasso and Zahed took one-year fellowships. Toward the end of his, Shaening Pokrasso felt “dissatisfied” with what he saw as the two traditional options: a lucrative big law job that doesn’t always involve engaging subject matter, or a public interest job that generates more passion but less money.

“It felt like a false dichotomy and that there’s a third option where you can

make good money, have a large impact, feel strongly about your work, and have some balance in your life,” he says.

His parents both own businesses, and Zahed’s father was an entrepreneur. Eager to help startups create social change, they took their own leap and launched Elevate Law and Strategy, later rebranding it SPZ Legal.

There were abundant challenges, especially convincing clients to enlist their services without much experience to offer. They took on small projects, and attended countless events to build their professional network.

“Now we take on much more sophisticated matters and are more intentional

about working with mission-focused companies looking to have a positive impact in the world,” Zahed says.

“While we’ve come a long way since those early days, we’ve kept our hustle mentality and make it a point not to take anything — especially our clients — for granted.”

After De La Flor transitioned from litigation to transactional work in South Florida, his old roommates reached out about moving back to California and joining them on SPZ’s leadership team.

“I knew it would allow me to focus on the type of work I love,” De La Flor says. “More importantly, being able to work with two of my best friends to grow a firm and mold it in our vision was an opportunity I couldn’t pass up.”

Advising on corporate governance, mergers and acquisitions, commercial contracts, and financings, SPZ works with startups worldwide in industries ranging from financial technology to education to consumer goods. Positive results and a fully remote-work model helped the firm add three lawyers and two paralegals from across the country last year.

“I went to law school because I wanted to develop a tool to expand the impact I could have in society,” Shaening Pokrasso says. “Working with social entrepreneurs really fits that ideal. I think they definitely appreciate having a legal advisor who is mission-aligned and sees the world as they see it.”

— *Andrew Cohen*

BACK TOGETHER: Former Berkeley Law roommates and 2013 grads Hash Zahed (left), Ryan Shaening Pokrasso (center), and David De La Flor now lead SPZ Legal.

