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Barclay Damon's 1st Female Head Talks Diversity, COVID-19

By **Adrian Cruz**

Law360 (January 6, 2021, 4:12 PM EST) -- Barclay Damon LLP was founded in 1855 by a pair of Syracuse, New York, brothers and transformed over the next 165 years from a local practice into a Northeast powerhouse with 12 offices across the region and nearly 300 attorneys. Despite all the developments, which included a merger, name change and numerous personnel hires, one thing at the firm stood constant, a man at the helm. Until now.

At the start of 2021, deputy managing partner Connie Cahill was elected by her peers as the replacement for longtime head John Langan, who stepped down after leading the firm for 20 years.

Cahill, a public finance partner who has been at Barclay Damon since 2006, spoke with Law360 on Tuesday about her new role, the firm's diversity efforts and its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

You're the first woman in the 165-year history of Barclay Damon to be named managing partner. What does that mean to you and the firm?

It really does thrill me. I'm of an age that when I graduated from law school, there were so many meetings, phone calls and closings where I was the only woman. It was that way for many years, where there weren't any women running law firms, practice groups, and there weren't even many women partners. I worked at two large New York City firms and I could count on one hand the number of women who were partners.

What's also really exciting for us is that while I'm the first woman to run the firm in 165 years, 50% of our management committee are women and over 40% of our practice groups are made up of women. It's not just that the managing partner's a woman, but we've been recruiting women for many years and we're really starting to see the fruits of that labor.

As managing partner, what are your goals for Barclay Damon's continued growth and development?

On a firmwide scale, diversity, equity and inclusion is a high priority along with strategic growth. John Langan has been involved in lateral growth for many years now and that will be one of his focuses as our new chair. We're looking to grow not only our upstate New York offices but also our major market offices such as New York, Boston and New Haven.

We'll also continue to enhance our usage of technology. Technology has served us very well. We transitioned pretty easily to a remote working environment, and I think it was our investment in both the technology infrastructure and training. We'll also continue to provide a career path for associates to really grow and become the strong leaders they're capable of. We want to make sure we have a platform that makes it conducive for young people to want to stay with us for their careers.

In recent years, diversity has become one of the most high-profile subjects in the legal industry. What are some of Barclay Damon's efforts to improve diversity and inclusion?

We're really trying to tackle diversity on a number of fronts, and it's an extremely high initiative of the firm. We try to infuse diversity in all our hiring decisions, use of vendors, and we really are trying to make sure that this firm is as diverse and inclusive as possible.

We've created a number of programs to increase diversity. We have a very successful diversity inclusion equity program run by one of our partners, and we also have a diversity partner committee which consists of a partner from each of our offices, and each office also has its own diversity committee made up of staff and attorneys alike.

Another example of our diversity effort is our very successful 1L summer program. As you may know, most firms have 2L summer programs, which we also have. But we decided that to increase our pipeline and exposure to students earlier in their legal career, we'd create a 1L program. We've done it for a number of summers, and now we have a number of participants who have graduated from the program and came back here as full-time associates.

Education is another major diversity tool — for example, on the use of pronouns. At the end of 2020, we had two "lunch and learns" educating people about the use of pronouns and that not everybody is a "he" or "she." We will be rolling out a program this year where people can voluntarily use their pronouns of choice on their email signatures and on our website.

You spearheaded Barclay Damon's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. What was that like? How is it currently coming along, and what can we expect for the new normal?

We went all remote as required by the laws in the states in which we operate. I headed a committee of attorneys and staff where we worked out the logistics of suddenly sending 475 people to work from home. I think all of our attorneys were very used to and comfortable with working from home, but we weren't sure on how it would work for staff like secretaries, some of whom didn't have Wi-Fi at home or didn't have a working laptop.

Our IT folks did an amazing job of getting people up and running very quickly. Our help desk was just phenomenal. If anybody had an issue, they were on top of it. They would log on to your computer and work out all your issues.

We were able to provide seamless service to our clients. We've done major depositions, closings, all in a remote environment without any extra stress or strain on our clients, which I'm very proud of.

We also decided early on that we would make office attendance voluntary. We didn't want to impose one rule on attorneys and then at the same time tell every secretary they had to come back. We went all voluntary until the end of 2020, extending it until June of this year, and we're still figuring out what

returning to the office will look like.

All options are open because we've done really well working from home, so we're trying to figure out how to keep a global law firm together, how you mentor or train if this continues on a long-term basis. If we can figure those things out, it's likely we would continue work from home for the foreseeable future.

--Editing by Jill Coffey.

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