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Aggressive Autonomy

Attorneys at San Francisco-based Cornerstone Law Group left the large-firm life behind to explore more stimulating work at a smaller shop, but continue to exercise big law chops.

By Joshua Sebold
Daily Journal Staff Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — Cornerstone Law Group is a haven for litigators with independent streaks. Many of the attorneys started in large well-known law firms, and abandoned that life to take greater control of their own practices. There are no associates and profits are shared on individual cases instead of collected in a firm-wide pool.

The firm has been in existence for nearly 20 years, with its current leadership team in place for the last four. Cornerstone's attorneys are primarily litigators spanning practice areas such as commercial litigation, construction law, real estate, consumer and class actions, creditor's rights, immigration, insurance, labor and employment and tax.

Many attorneys at Cornerstone also decided to leave big law after experiencing frustration with the conflict system, which prevented them from conducting practices as diverse as their interests.

Gordon W. Renneisen, a commercial litigator who was part of Heller Ehrman LLP's insurance recovery team, said his work was interesting, but he had to repeatedly turn down stimulating plaintiff's work because of his former firm's structure.

"At Heller you literally had to fill out a memo and wait for it to cycle through two or three different committees to bring in a case that didn't fit neatly into whatever boxes were set up before."

Renneisen, who fortuitously left Heller in the year before its financial woes became apparent, said he and his fellow principals at Cornerstone are glad to be in control of their own destiny, but have an appreciation for the big law chops they gained earlier in their careers.

"It was pretty uniformly acknowledged that Heller Ehrman, whatever else, those lawyers could really write a brief," he said. "And I think I can really



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From left, Gordon W. Renneisen, Paul J. Byrne and Harry G. Lewis, attorneys at Cornerstone Law Group.

write a brief because that's the world I came out of."

Renneisen and fellow firm principal Harry G. Lewis earned a published opinion from California's 1st District Court of Appeal in a class action against Neiman Marcus Group Inc. in July.

The pair convinced the court of appeal to uphold a district court's reversal of its own order to compel arbitration and to declare the arbitration agreement in question as unconscionable, kicking the case back to the trial court.

The litigation centers on meal and rest breaks, working off the clock and overtime pay.

The firm's attorneys collaborate often, but the structure allows the firm's 10 principals and six special counsel to follow their own interests.

Paul J. Byrne has a commercial litigation practice with an emphasis on employment law, but he's also been working on lieutenant governor Gavin Newsom's campaigns for more than a decade, stretching back to Newsom's initial mayoral campaign in San Francisco.

"His policies I agreed with, but it was just kind of an opportunity at the right place at the right time," Byrne

said. "I helped him with the lieutenant governor race and I'm helping him in the governor's race as well."

Byrne got involved with representing public agencies while at Nixon Peabody LLP, where he represented the San Francisco Zoological Society in litigation involving a tiger that escaped and killed a 17-year-old on Christmas Day 2007.

He worked alongside former San Francisco city attorney Louise Renne in the case, after she had returned to private practice. The pair have referred cases back and forth ever since.

"I thought he was a wonderful attorney and we became friends and professional colleagues," she said. "He's strategic in his thinking, his judgment is very sound and he's certainly ethical and honest."

Renne said Byrne's versatility is one of his strengths and he's particularly good at employment law.

Lewis, one of the firm's executive committee members, along with Byrne, Renneisen and Brian S. Healy, found his path to independence by launching the immigration practice at Curiale Dellaverson LLP. Lewis said he realized he needed his own book of business and that he could cross

sell business immigration work to the firm's clients.

"I got into it during the dot com boom and we were an employment law firm," he said. "Our contacts were with the HR people and they were being poorly serviced because there was so much demand the immigration firms couldn't keep up with it."

David Simmons, senior vice president at Capital Access Group, a provider of U.S. Small Business Administration loans, said he appreciates the firm's expertise, its bedside manner in explaining legal matters to him as a client and its affordable rates.

"Their price was about \$100 an hour less than the two or three other attorneys we interviewed and their track record based on the people we talked to was just as good."

The firm's hourly rates range from \$350 to \$650 and it brings in gross annual revenue of around \$3.2 million.

Simmons worked with Healy on situations where his customers stopped paying back their loans during the downturn. He later hired Lewis to defend his company when a borrower defaulted and claimed they weren't properly alerted to provisions of the loan.

Simmons said Lewis won the case and recouped attorney costs.

The firm has regular work in Southern California and the principals agree they would be interested in opening an office there if the right attorneys came along with an offer. The principals said an intellectual property litigator would be a logical addition to go with their current offerings in trade secret and copyright infringement litigation.

But in general, the first priority is to maintain the firm's current format.

Lewis said merging in any way that would restrict the freedom of the firm's attorneys is a non-starter. He said seeing postings for big law job openings still causes a visceral reaction for him.

"I get chills when I get those emails from LinkedIn."