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Newsmaker

A big change among Charlotte's legal elite

James, McElroy & Diehl names a new managing partner



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On July 1, Catherine Barnes will become managing partner of **James, McElroy & Diehl**, succeeding Pender McElroy, who is stepping down from the role after more than 30 years but will continue to practice at the law firm.

There are very few female managing partners at Charlotte law firms, particularly at those the size of James, McElroy & Diehl, which has 36 lawyers. McElroy says Barnes, who specializes in corporate and real estate law, has the traits necessary for the job: an interest in the business of law firms, a diplomatic disposition and a thick skin.

"Not a lot of people appreciate what goes into this job," he says.

Barnes attended Salem State College in Massachusetts and spent two years as a legal secretary at Robinson Bradshaw & Hinson before heading to law school at UNC Chapel Hill. She clerked at James, McElroy & Diehl after her second year and joined the firm after graduating.

Barnes recently spoke to the *Charlotte Business Journal* about her new role, what it requires and why the naming of a female managing partner shouldn't be a watershed event.

How did you become a nominee for this position?

My business practice, which is helpful. And I think I'm sort of perceived as being level. I don't fly off the handle, and I don't tend to sway one way or the other too much. I tend to keep it in the middle of the road, and I think that's how I'm regarded by my partners.

There was a thought that we needed a succession plan a couple years ago, and eventually a couple of the partners came to me and asked how I would feel about it. Pender and I have an exceptionally good working relationship, and that probably made me an easy candidate as well. It's been a two-year transition, and he's been unbelievably gracious and helpful.

So the managing partner role is a little bit like becoming CEO?

Kind of. Although as far as how we operate, it's not like my vote carries any additional weight. Everybody here gets one vote. It's more being a point of entry for a lot of issues.

When something comes up, I'm the funnel, and I try to deal with it without having to involve everybody. Pender said to me when we were first talking about it, "My role is to make it so that my partners can practice law as efficiently and effectively as they can and not be distracted." I'm going to have that embroidered on a pillow. You can't have a better description than that. And so I try to deal with things as they come up and make sure things rock along without distractions.

How do you juggle the new responsibilities with your own practice and still find that work-life balance?

It's one of the bigger challenges. My kids are in middle school, so they still want me around. That's a limited window. I'm figuring it out. Just trying to be as efficient as I can be.

Up until a couple of years ago, I went out to lunch several days a week, either with friends or co-workers. If you go out to lunch, it's an hour-and-a-half, realistically. I don't do that anymore. I go in the break room, eat my sandwich and go back to work.

I come in early in the mornings, and I tend to work late Friday nights. That tends to be movie night at our house, so I'm not missed. I can work late on a Friday night. It's quiet, and I can get an awful lot of stuff done and feel like I'm not buried.

Is becoming a female managing partner significant?

I think at this point, more than 50% of law school graduates are women, so I don't think it ought to be. I'm glad to see it's happening, but I don't think it should be like a watershed. It should just be the natural progression of things. I know tons of women partners my age.

When I first started, there were fewer women partners, but now I think and I hope that's not a real consideration. I've never felt here like I've been treated differently.

What are the opportunities and challenges for a firm of this size?

There's been a lot of talk lately about firm specialization and boutique firms being the wave of the future. That's not us.

We can handle almost anything that comes our way. There's just very few areas of law that we don't practice in. I think that does put us in a unique position of being able to really handle the life of our clients. Really anything that comes somebody's way, there's somebody here who's done it and knows how to do it really well. That allows us to provide something

unique for our clients that I think we couldn't do if we were a boutique. I like the fact that we can really help our clients in all the aspects of their life.

And I think our firm's a good size. We've got enough critical mass that we can handle all of those things but we're not unwieldy.

How would you describe your management style?

I am by nature collaborative. I'm not a litigator for a reason. I think I'm a team builder. I want everybody to succeed. I want to have people feel empowered. I want to have people feel like they're part of the team. That's important to me.

It's been a steep learning curve. I've had to learn about things that probably didn't occur to me when I was just practicing. But I feel like I've got my arms around it. My skill set lies in being organized and in being able to think ahead and try to foresee problems and head them off and figure out how to deal with them, which is why I think I've been successful in my legal practice.

I think I can help create an environment where people can really do great things as lawyers without having to deal with the other stuff that comes with working somewhere. Fortunately, Pender is staying on. So I can go to him and say "Did this ever happen before?" That's invaluable. I'm looking forward to it.

I think as women we're conditioned not to toot her own horns, but I'm confident that I'm going to be good for this position. My daughters are proud of me.

Will Boye covers commercial real estate and law firms for the Charlotte Business Journal.