

Kerin Kaminski's passion is to be a good lawyer, community member, business owner and example for women.

By Kristen Hampshire

A litigator is really someone who learns, then teaches — someone who listens, finds facts, translates information and repackages it in a neat, clean presentation. The cases that really resonate with a jury stick like life lessons. Any good lawyer, or teacher, knows that.

"Once I learn what the facts are, I am eager to teach other people what happened," says Kerin Kaminski, who founded Giffen & Kaminski with her partner, Karen Giffen, two years ago after litigating business cases for 18 years and teaching high school history for four years. Abe Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. are her role models. So are strong women in corporate counsel like Rebecca McMahon at KeyCorp, one of Giffen & Kaminski's largest clients. "To advocate a position is to teach your view of what happened. Teaching and litigating are similar skills," Kaminski says.

As the first woman and woman partner at Cavitch, Familo, Durkin & Frutkin, where she joined after graduating from Cleveland-Marshall College of Law in 1984, Kaminski has learned and taught a number of lessons about being a good lawyer, community member, business owner and example for women in the field.

"She is an in-house counsel's dream," says McMahon, senior vice president and associate general counsel at KeyCorp in Cleveland. "She offers a rare blend of superior legal analysis, extra deal making, insightful psychoanalysis and fundamental practices. She really combines those qualities into one, which makes her a tremendous asset."

Kaminski says she simply loves to learn.

"Every step you take in a career where you go from



Kerin Kaminski

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being the second chair on a case to the first tests your skills," she says. And Kaminski loves nothing better than testing her skills in the courtroom. "Your opponent needs to know you are willing to go to trial, and I am willing," she says.

Mostly, Kaminski is willing to worry on behalf of clients. She wants to advocate, not wage war.

"Our clients are already engaged in a fight, and my job is not to deepen that wound," she says. "I am interested in making sure my clients know that I'm the one worrying for them."

But Kaminski is no softie. She's a cheerleader.

"I'm a 'we can do it; let's go; hire that person; build this!'" she says, describing a symbiotic relationship with Giffen. Today, their firm is eight lawyers strong, with a strong support staff. Kaminski isn't the smooth talker — that's Giffen. But she's the passionate teacher, the fact finder, the fired-up half of their partnership. Especially when it comes to women helping women.

"In the legal profession, we are still not in the seats of power," Kaminski says. "I really believe we are on the cusp of having that power and authority, but women have to make sure that as we

climb the ladder, that we reach around and help other women. We need to be cognizant of that issue."

Kaminski did a bit of soul searching herself, along with Giffen, before deciding to leave Cavitch after 18 years. The firm's evaluation of goals for upcoming years inspired a personal assessment for Kaminski and Giffen of their ideas for the future.

"Karen and I realized we got more job satisfaction from working with in-house counsels of larger corporations because they could discern a job well done," Kaminski explains.

Further research churned up information about shareholder-driven initiatives at *Fortune* 500 companies that centered on hiring women- and minority-owned law firms — not just firms where women worked.

"We surveyed the market and found that Cleveland had very few women-owned firms that could litigate business issues to the level that Karen and I could," Kaminski says.

"This was an opportunity for us to really do something different in the city of Cleveland that is novel and would be the first of its kind," Kaminski says. She can count the number of women-owned firms on one hand, and from

Cleveland Bar Association records she knows that there are just 35 to 40 women partners in Cleveland who litigate. "There are women out there who are sole practitioners, but law firms — there are very few," she says.

Meanwhile, by reaching out as a teacher, a businesswoman, a lawyer and community member in Cleveland, Kaminski says she has unleashed the extravert in me.

"I always perceived myself as being shy," she says, "and I don't think I am anymore."

"There are so many people I admire that I didn't know were out there because I wasn't out meeting people as often as I am now," she adds.

Community spirit is a prerequisite at Giffen & Kaminski, and the firm expects that its partners and associates dedicate time to "a calling lawyers should answer," Kaminski says.

For her, this means supporting organizations like the Hitchcock Center for Women, a drug and alcohol inpatient treatment center that allows women to bring children with them during their stay. She is president of the board.

"Karen and I really want to be a beacon of hope to women," Kaminski says. ✎

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