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SOUTH FLORIDA LEGAL GUIDE

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KELLEY KRONENBERG

STATEWIDE BUSINESS

Firm Shifts into High-Growth Mode



*Howard Wander, Michael Fichtel
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WITH A NEW BRICKELL AVENUE office, additional practice groups in West Palm Beach and other locations, Kelley Kronenberg is enjoying a growth trajectory that shows no signs of slowing. Today, the Fort Lauderdale firm – long known for workers' compensation defense – has more than 100 attorneys in a network of ten offices, representing clients across more than 25 practice areas.

"Five years ago, we made a dramatic change to the model of our firm," says Michael J. Fichtel, principal partner/chief executive officer, Fort Lauderdale.

"Because of changes to the workers' compensation statute, as well as the economic downturn, we decided to diversify our practice areas. That strategic decision allowed us to embark on a new growth path, and attract great laterals and new associates."

With nine offices in Florida and one in Chicago, Kelley Kronenberg provides legal and business counsel to corporations, insurance companies, business owners and entrepreneurs. "Our firm's growth has helped us attract larger clients looking for the uniformity and

consistency in handling their matters," says Howard L. Wander, principal partner/chief operating officer, West Palm Beach. "For instance, we had a client in Fort Lauderdale who took advantage of a business opportunity in Chicago, and we were able to provide continuing one-shop service from that office."

Heath S. Eskalyo, principal partner/chief financial officer, Fort Lauderdale, adds that community support is one of the firm's core values. "We have leaders in each office who spearhead our Kelley Kronenberg Cares (KCC) initiatives," he says. "We

support everything from a school supply drive to breast cancer research to Habitat for Humanity. We're always ready to roll up our sleeves and help out."

Last year, Eskalyo organized "Tri Sharks," an informal group of South Florida executives and business owners who share his competitive passion for triathlons. "We may compete against each other on land and sea, but in Tri Sharks, we work together in business and charity."

A CHANGING BUSINESS MODEL

Attorneys Bud Adams, Charles Kelley and Steven Kronenberg founded the law firm in 1980 in Coconut Grove. Soon afterwards, the office moved north to Miami Lakes with smaller offices in Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach. Since its inception, Kelley Kronenberg served businesses and the insurance industry, with a strong focus on defending workers' compensation cases.

Fichtel joined in 1987, followed by Wander in 1988, and Eskalyo in 1993. As the firm's founders retired, the leadership of the firm passed to these three equity partners. "We have an effective business model that allows us to deliver tremendous back-office support to our attorneys throughout the firm," says Fichtel.

One innovative support service is Kelley Kronenberg's in-house, full-scale marketing and business development department, led by Thomas Choberka, chief marketing and business development officer. "Unlike many firms, our team provides the attorneys with direct access to marketing and business development support, including sales training, business coaching, cross marketing techniques, and client development initiatives," says Choberka. The team also provides public relations services including social media and website management, client seminar planning and event management. "These services provide the attorneys with the support, structure and focus that ultimately contributes to growing the firm's business," says Choberka.

"Another innovative support service we offer is our training team," says Wander. "We introduce new firm members to our leading-edge technology, and familiarize them with our online policies. Our training team is one of the many ways we ensure consistency throughout the firm."

Eskalyo notes that the firm has an annual retreat to educate attorneys and staffers on new legal issues while fostering a sense of teamwork and reinforcing the firm's values. At our retreats, and throughout the year, we emphasize the critical nature of top notch client service," Eskalyo says. "Now, simply doing a great job for our clients is not enough. We believe in fostering an open and ongoing business relationship with our clients to maintain their satisfaction and loyalty."

EXPANDING IN SOUTH FLORIDA

In March 2015, Kelley Kronenberg expanded its litigation services to the Miami market by opening a temporary office under the leadership of Jorge L. Cruz-Bustillo, managing partner. The firm's permanent office opens on January 8 in the Sabadell United Bank Building on Brickell Avenue in the heart of Miami's financial district.

"Our new space will reflect our brand – modern, fresh and progressive," says Fichtel. "We strive to make Kelley Kronenberg a great place to work, and our new space is part of that commitment."

Cruz-Bustillo brought a team of attorneys from his previous boutique law firm, and two Fort Lauderdale partners, Tanaz Salehi and Dominick Tamarazzo, relocated, with several associates and staff, to round out the Miami litigation group. The group focuses its practice on defending first party and third party insurance claims, as well as commercial and construction litigation.

"Kelley Kronenberg is an aggressive and growing firm that is creating a great deal of buzz in the market," says Cruz-Bustillo. "We look forward to the challenge of growing the new office in Miami."

Last May, the firm added a Bankruptcy Practice Group in Tampa and a Family Law Practice Group in Fort Lauderdale. In October, a Complex Commercial Litigation team, led by Irwin Gilbert, joined the firm's West Palm Beach office. "When I was presented with the opportunity to bring our team to Kelley Kronenberg, it seemed like a natural fit to add our services to the firm's expanding list of legal offerings," says Gilbert.

Gilbert recently led the successful defense of Palm Beach Gardens-based builder Dreamstar Custom Homes and

company president Brett Handler in a lawsuit filed by a Wellington resident for alleged construction defects, breach of contract, fraud and other claims. Dreamstar and Handler filed a countersuit claiming the owner breached the contract by failing to make required payments and improperly ending the agreement. The jury found no construction defects and agreed that the owner improperly terminated the contract.

BUILDING A DIVERSE BUSINESS FIRM

With Kelley Kronenberg's increased diversification, workers' compensation matters now amount to a small fraction of the firm's cases. "We now defend civil liability, wage and hour claims, and wrongful termination matters as part of our employment defense practice," says Eskalyo, adding that the firm represents both plaintiffs and defendants in commercial litigation matters. "Our attorneys also handle Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) litigation, data privacy and cyber security matters, real property litigation, business transactions issues and many types of insurance cases, including general liability and property and casualty insurance defense."

Fichtel says business clients appreciate the law firm's corporate structure (CEO/COO/CFO). "Our clients now are much more sophisticated consumers of legal services. They appreciate that we are able to look at their cases from a business perspective, and know how to evaluate matters both legally and economically," he says. "We understand what business owners are facing and advise them on the strategies necessary to achieve their desired results."

In addition, the firm strives to provide additional business value to its clients, such as advising on safety issues or helping to write an executive-level job description. Both Eskalyo and Wander are certified by the State of Florida to provide continuing education courses and conduct seminars for clients on a variety of insurance defense matters.

"Our firm's goal is to be a trusted counselor, not just a business attorney handling a file," Eskalyo says. "We invest in building long-term client relationships, because they will determine the future for our firm." ❧