

WOMEN OWNED LAW

Sponsor Spotlight

1. Please describe your career path. What were the key moves you made that helped start you on the road to being an entrepreneur?

I came from one of the hundred largest law firms in the country. I succeeded by establishing myself in an arena outside of the traditional large law firm old boys' network: as a brief writer. Trial work, in the few cases that go to trial, is dominated by white men in Big Law. Women get few opportunities to try cases, and almost never get to do so as lead counsel. See ["First Chairs at Trial: More Women Need Seats at the Table - A Research Report on the Participation of Women Lawyers as Lead Counsel and Trial Counsel in Litigation"](#) by my friend and mentor, Roberta D. Liebenberg and Women Owned Law colleague, Stephanie A. Scharf. In large firms, less depositions take place as well; at least, I saw far less depositions in large law firms, and took far less, than I saw and took working in the small firm where I started out after my clerkship. Nevertheless, writing, the skill that determines virtually all litigation results, was not as highly prized.

On the positive side, that meant I didn't have to vie for the chance to tackle meaty issues in briefs. I'd ask for them and get them and in my brief writing, I obtained near total autonomy. I could map my briefs out, decide on the arguments I wanted to make, and write them as I saw fit.

I started out writing briefs before state and federal trial courts. Soon, I graduated to writing before state and federal intermediate appellate courts and soon thereafter, I was writing briefs before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and the Supreme Court of the United States. Also, as I advanced from handling trial to appellate briefs, so did the size of my matters. By the time I gave notice to launch my own firm, I was handling nine figure cases.

If I had stayed in a large law firm, I might have had an exemplary career, but I never would have gotten known for my trial work or built a client base. I had done a lot of depositions and arbitrations during my initial years of practice, but I didn't know I could own a courtroom and grow a client base until I launched my firm and did so.

One of the key moves that helped me start my firm was initially partnering with another woman lawyer, someone my senior who had a substantial client, a global organization. She had been my opposing counsel in a case. We had similar lawyering styles and became good friends. She wanted to exit the traditional practice of law and start a new career, so we started a law firm together and I supported her work while she got the educational degree she needed to do so. While she was in school and working with me, she helped transition her client-company to me.

Over time, representatives of that client began coming to me for issues unrelated to our initial engagement. The relationship grew into a real bond that I treasure. When the people there started thinking of me as their trusted advisor, when they began multiplying their business with me, I knew they would recommend me to other companies.

I've been growing my client base ever since.

Another key move that grew my business was my firm joining NAMWOLF, the National Association of Minority and Women Owned Law Firms. NAMWOLF has extremely rigorous membership criteria. The Axelrod Firm is one of only a handful of qualifying law firms in Pennsylvania and likewise in Washington, DC. Our team of attorneys has grown our client base, our professional profiles, and our contacts through NAMWOLF.

2. What made you choose to start your own law-related business?

I wanted to create an environment I did not see in the profession. I wanted to lead a firm in which every member of my team – every lawyer and member of our staff – would be chosen not just for their excellence at what they do and “fit” with the Firm culture and each other, but also because each is motivated by a core belief in equality, diversity, and inclusion. I wanted to build a forward-thinking team of superstars and diversity champions, with lawyers respected as outstanding advocates and positive change makers. Launching my own firm enabled me to do so.

Many of our clients are attracted to us because they are impressed by my team's excellence and they, too, want to be diversity champions. We find synergies working with our clients that enhance their representatives' professional profiles and those of their companies. We pride ourselves on making our clients look good.

3. Why did you choose to sponsor Women Owned Law?

I became a Women Owned Law Founder's Circle member, accepted a position on Women Owned Law's Advisory Committee, and am co-chairing Women Owned Law's Diversity and Inclusion Task Force, to advance the needle even

further. My Women Owned Law colleagues are a dynamic group that like The Axelrod Firm, is committed to making positive change. These are women who like me, had the courage to go out on their own and the business savvy to succeed. We work refer each other cases and help grow each other's businesses.

Women-owned law firms as we exist now are the first ripple in what will be a tidal wave. Women-owned businesses are launching at a rate of over 1,000 a day, see: <https://tinyurl.com/yd8wt7I9>, and women-owned law firms are quickly popping up, and growing along with them.

Many of us are determined to create groundbreaking new models for our staff, associates, and partners, policies and procedures that equally include women and minorities, policies that, for instance, welcome flexibility and working mothers.

Over time, women-owned law firms will grow. One day, the largest law firms in the country will be as diverse and inclusive as we are. I want to help speed up the arrival of that day so my nephews and nieces, the daughter I'm expecting, and their children, can enjoy a more inclusive, fair, happy, and equal world.

4. What advice do you have for an early-stage entrepreneur in the same business?

Do everything they say – work hard, study the Rules, etc. – but get out there and build relationships. You will become successful in proportion to the amount of people who care about you, think highly of you, believe in you, and want to see you succeed, so don't eat your lunch behind your desk. Take time to sit down and talk with other people. Invest in building relationships.

Build what I call a coalition of allies. Setup meetings with people you admire who likewise think highly of you. Ask them what publications, speaking engagements, and positions they want. Tell them which ones you want, and sit down and figure out how you will help each other get them.

Take a page from the Carla Harris book, Carla's Pearls. Think about what words you want people to use when they describe you. Choose words designed to lead you toward your vision of where you want your career to go and who you want to be, and ask your coalition of allies to use those words to describe you. Teach them to build their descriptive words and to share their chosen words with the coalition. Build your coalition's professional pathway to success.

Be strategic. Think about business development from the beginning of your career and come up with a plan to attract clients that fits your personality.

Think about launching a law firm. Many women found firms as a last resort. Instead, consider planning for it. Owning a firm can be a great option, both economically and

for your sense of self-worth. Launching my firm was the best economic move I ever made, and the most professionally and personally rewarding. We've passed our 10-year anniversary, have offices in Philadelphia and Washington, DC, just made two new hires, and are looking to expand into new cities in 2018.

If you really want to go far, have a vision, clearly define it, and pursue it. Law firms generally do a terrible job of defining their vision. Being the best, the most reputable, the brightest, etc. isn't a vision. How do I know? When have you achieved that vision? How far are your competitors from reaching it? If you can't measure how far you or your competitors are from your vision, you haven't come up with one. A vision is a clearly defined goal, one to which you can plot a course.

Come up with a clearly defined, measurable, achievable vision that distinguishes who you are from your competition (brand yourself), and make that vision concrete.

Who is Sheryl L. Axelrod?

Sheryl L. Axelrod is the President & CEO of The Axelrod Firm, P.C., a woman-owned law firm with offices in Philadelphia and Washington, DC, providing strategic, results-driven advice and representation to companies in their employment, bodily injury, and commercial litigation matters, handling appeals, and serving as a Judge Pro Tempore / Settlement Master, helping parties resolve their disputes. She has been rated by her peers as one of the Top 100 Super Lawyers in Pennsylvania.

She is a Fellow in Litigation Counsel of America, an organization of top trial lawyers that accepts, less than one-half of one percent of the country's lawyers. She has been profiled in Profiles in Diversity Journal; by the American Bar Association, which published a "Spotlight" piece about her; by the Temple Law Alumni Association, which awarded her its distinguished Service Award; by Ms. JD, which profiled her; and by Law360, which featured her in its "Female Powerbrokers" series.

She is the recipient of the Temple Law Alumni Association's Women's Champion Award and the 2017 NAMWOLF Yolanda Coly Advocacy Award for her lifetime of work in the equality, diversity, and inclusion space.