

Katten's NYC Head On Her Long, Rewarding Path To Partner

By Tracey Read

Law360 (May 17, 2023, 3:32 PM EDT) -- Wendy Cohen likes to joke that it took her 25 years to make partner.

But Cohen, who started at what is now called Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP right out of New York University School of Law in 1986, continues to move up at the firm despite leaving for five years to start a family.

She'll take over June 1 as the new managing partner of the New York office, following Katten structured finance and securitization partner Chris DiAngelo in the role.

Cohen recently spoke with Law360 Pulse about her delayed path to the top of the career ladder, and how she hopes her story helps other women figure out their own trail forward.

"It really was a win-win-win for everybody, but it was not typical," said Cohen, who was born and raised on the South Shore of Long Island. "Being made office managing partner for me is sort of the culmination of that path. And part of the reason that I'm so excited about it is because I think that women today have a little bit more opportunity and flexibility, especially in this post-COVID world."

The Beginning

Cohen was a well-regarded associate at New York City-based Rosenman & Colin LLP, the predecessor firm to Katten. As a second-year associate, she started working with Fred Santo, a now-retired partner who specialized in financial services.

"I really enjoyed working with Fred because he didn't care when I got my work done," she said. "Back in those days, we had no Caller ID. And so the phone would ring at 5:30 on a Friday, and you'd answer it, and it'd be the assigning partner giving you an assignment for the following Monday. And that just made me insane."

But Santo was different, telling Cohen that he didn't mind if she preferred staying late during the week and not coming in on the weekends as long as the work got done.

"And because that was Fred's practice area, I became a specialist in private investment funds, and also the commodities and futures world," she said.



Wendy Cohen

Cohen continued to work with Santo until her seventh or eighth year, when she and her investment adviser husband, Jeff, began trying to start a family. It wasn't going well, so she took herself off the partner track.

Then she started coming into the office four days a week at an 80% alternative work schedule. That was in 1993.

"So even back then, there was this willingness to be flexible," she said. "I think that they were in the minority certainly at big firms at the time."

Then she became pregnant. Her twins, Andrew and Perri, now 28, were born in 1995.

After maternity leave, Cohen — who had moved away from the city to Westport, Connecticut — began working part time, coming into the office two days a week and working from home one day a week.

"But in 1995, technology was nothing like it was today," she said. "It was terrible. It just really didn't work all that well. And I kind of felt like I wasn't doing anything well. I was not doing my legal job well, I wasn't doing my mommy job well, and at the end of '96, I became pregnant with my third and I left."

A Silver Lining

During her nearly five-year hiatus, she continued to stay in touch with Santo.

In early 2001, she called up Santo and asked to come back and work for him on a project basis. The twins were now 7 and her youngest, Caroline, was 5.

"At that point, my husband was working in Westport and I said, 'You know what, I am losing my marbles. I've been the PTA president and on the board of my synagogue and I just am losing my marbles!'" Cohen said with a laugh.

Santo agreed to let her return on a project basis, which morphed into coming in one day a week and then two days a week.

By then, technology had been vastly improved.

"Email was different, remote login was different, phone Caller ID — all of that was really different, so I was the beneficiary of that," she said. "That really helped tremendously in enabling me to continue to provide excellent client service and still be a mom. I was reachable; I had a cellphone. When I first started, I had a beeper."

By 2002, Rosenman & Colin had merged with the Chicago-founded Katten Muchin Zavis to create the current firm.

"Katten was a well-known Chicago firm that didn't have a New York presence. Rosenman was a well-



Wendy Cohen and her family at her 15th college reunion in front of her freshman dorm at the University of Pennsylvania in 1998. From left is her son, Andrew, 4, Cohen holding her daughter Caroline, 10 months, daughter Perri, 4, and her husband, Jeff Cohen. (Courtesy of Wendy Cohen)

known New York firm that didn't have a Chicago presence. And it really was a wonderful merger," she said.

At the time, Katten management knew of Cohen's part-time arrangement and were fine with it. She continued that way until 2008, when the financial crisis hit, and she started coming in three days a week because there was more work to be done.

"By that point, I was working close to full-time hours but still only coming into the office three days a week," she said. "That continued until 2011. At the time, I was getting paid as a consultant. I had a title as special counsel, and I got paid by the hour. [A firm leader] rang me up one day and said, 'You know what, you're starting to make too much money. You need to take a pay cut and become a partner.'"

And so she did.

"I am not aware of any other person at that time at an Am Law 100 firm who made partner coming into the office part time," she said. "It was not heard of at the time, but I did."

'Mom Has a Career'

Cohen continued to work with Santo, becoming a capital partner in 2013 and then co-chair of their practice group. Santo fully retired last year, and Cohen took over their clients.

"Wendy is an exceptional lawyer and leader who gives her all to our clients and has proven commitment to fostering the success of other lawyers, particularly women, especially in the field of finance," Lance Zinman, global chair of Katten's financial markets and funds practice, said in a statement. "Those commendable qualities and others will enhance her efforts as office managing partner to continue spurring strategic growth not just in our New York office but throughout the firm."

In some ways, Cohen said, she believes that COVID and working remotely were the silver lining for lawyers, but particularly for female lawyers.

"It was somewhat of a blessing and a curse," she said. "You were available 24/7. On the other hand, people understood that you had children, you had dogs, you had other responsibilities. And that didn't mean that you were less dedicated or less professional or less willing to, you know, to roll up your sleeves and get the work done in a capable manner and provide excellent service. But you might not be able to be on a call between 6 and 8 when you were having dinner with your kids and putting them to bed."

Cohen said a combination of having an amazing husband, an understanding law firm and better technology helped her accomplish all she's done both at home and at work.

"As a mother, I was able to adjust my schedule to be there for all my children's events," she said. "Somebody wise told me a long time ago that you don't have to be present all the time. You just have to be present when you're present. And I really took that to heart, and my kids learned that Mom has a profession, Mom has a career. Mom's a successful lawyer. When I sent that [managing partner] announcement to my kids, all of them came back and said, 'Wow, we're just so proud of you.'"

Cohen noted that Katten was ahead of its time in many ways with work-life balance arrangements.

"At least here at our firm, it's valued, and it's not only acceptable, but it is well regarded," she said. "We like having well-rounded people who have connections other than their work, because that makes you a more well-rounded person, it makes you a healthier, more balanced person, a happier person, and those people are better lawyers. These days, I think there is more than one traditional path."

Cohen noted that the firm currently has only one female managing partner, commercial real estate attorney Karen Nelson in Charlotte, North Carolina.

"I think bringing another female voice to that conversation is going to be valuable," she said.

She said she found it interesting that when the internal announcement of her elevation was made, a number of people seemed shocked to learn that she had taken a lengthy period of time off before making partner.

"I think getting that word out hopefully will reflect well," she said. "I want the legal world in New York to know that part of Katten, because I think it's what makes us really special. I don't want to say we are unique in that regard. But we're certainly at the forefront of that kind of mentality, and I think it reflects well."

--Editing by Karin Roberts.