

LAW WEEK

COLORADO

'We're Like Switzerland and Israel'

Two former Reilly Pozner partners start female-centric firm

BY HANNAH GARCIA
LAW WEEK COLORADO

For female attorneys concerned about the lack of women in the top tiers of the legal profession, there is at least one actionable option: start a new law firm.

For criminal defenders Iris Eytan and Dru Nielsen, with a collective four decades of litigation experience, it was the only option.

"It was right for us to start our own firm," Nielsen said, sipping coffee out of a Wonder Woman-themed mug that matches her partner's, gifts from well-wishers. "We're in our prime, and I think we're uniquely suited to know how the world works. We're two women, raising children and having a career."

The pair proverbially opened their doors under the name Eytan Nielsen July 1 and plan to move into a new office space in Denver's Cherry Creek neighborhood on Nov. 1. Eytan and Nielsen made the move after years as partners and running a criminal defense practice at Reilly Pozner, a large Colorado firm known for its work in civil litigation.

"There was no feud or animosity in the decision to break out, but just a clear division in the way we think," Eytan said. The two are still practicing within Reilly Pozner's office until moving into their own space, though they are no longer working with the firm.

Once the news spread about their departure, Eytan and Nielsen said offers came in from other firms and attorneys, but a desire to be independent and a growing fatigue with the lack of women in positions of power were enough to convince them to go their own route. While women make up about half of the number of associates in private practice nationally, the numbers drop to 20 percent for partners at large and 17 percent for equity partners, according to the American Bar Association.

"It was kind of a no-brainer because we work so well together and we don't want to work for anyone else," Nielsen said. "We don't want to be dependent and follow the mold, so we have to figure out our own mold."

And the two are confident their complementary partnership — "yin and yang," according to Nielsen, and "Switzerland and Israel," according to



FORMER REILLY POZNER ATTORNEYS IRIS EYTAN AND DRU NIELSEN STARTED THEIR OWN FIRM JULY 1.

PHOTO: LAW WEEK, HANNAH GARCIA

Eytan — makes for potent advocacy. They are also close personal friends whose children play together as well as seasoned partners in the courtroom.

"Dru and I are constantly disagreeing with each other," Eytan said jokingly. Nielsen's "Switzerland" moniker refers to her diplomatic nature — shrewd and strategic — while Eytan comes from a family of Israeli immigrants and has a reputation as a forceful defender.

"It works for her because that's who she is. She (Eytan) is relentless and persistent and she won't stop until she gets the yes," Nielsen said. "That's why we work together."

Before they came to Reilly Pozner, Eytan in 2001 and Nielsen in 2007, both spent time as public defenders, what Eytan called "salt-of-the-earth" work.

Working for a larger, privately funded firm might have seemed

counterintuitive to their history as advocates for the kinds of people who could not afford larger, privately funded law firms.

"We make money to support our families, but we don't do this job, we don't practice law to make money," Eytan said. But that doesn't mean they aren't happy they had the experience, according to Nielsen. With exposure to the way a private firm does business, the pair said they feel ready to run their own, albeit smaller, operation with access to similar resources ranging from trial graphics to investigators.

"It's so different from the way the public defender's office runs," Nielsen said. "There, we didn't talk to graphic designers. It was just, 'learn to make a PowerPoint.'"

Eytan said there have been some "constructive questions" about how they may run a law firm, like if they

should pick up another practice to help pay the bills or offers to work for other firms. Even still, Nielsen said when the time came to make the decision, "there was not a lot of deliberation."

"We took every client with us, and every one has been so supportive, including everyone at Reilly Pozner" Nielsen said.

As far as growth, both women said they have a fully loaded docket of criminal cases and no immediate plans to add an associate. Although when they do, there is a better-than-good chance that associate will answer to the pronoun, "she."

"We hope to grow the firm, but we need to lay our roots down and get a feel for what it's like to be our own law firm," Eytan said. "But we're going to need help. Things may look different by the end of 2016." •

— Hannah Garcia, HGarcia@circuitmedia.com