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LAW FIRM BUSINESS

Stepping It Up

Two women who started their careers at Lieff Cabraser now shepherd big and small cases at the firm they founded together, sometimes surprising older opponents.

By Saul Sugarman
Daily Journal Staff Writer

Being a woman in the male-dominated plaintiffs' bar can be an advantage, according to Lori E. Andrus, a founding partner of Andrus Anderson LLP.

She said she's participated in multiple depositions in which defense attorneys thought she was the court reporter. The fact that she's an attorney gives an element of surprise that sometimes throws off the defense, she said.

"The majority of court reporters are women," said Jennie Lee Anderson, the other founding partner of the firm. "When a younger woman arrives and there's an older gentleman on the other side of the table, he'll make assumptions about who she is based on how she looks."

If those assumptions are about competency — or lack thereof — then they're wrong. Andrus Anderson has handled a variety of cases since opening in 2007, ranging from suits on behalf of a single person in state court to mass torts and class actions in federal court against some of the world's most recognizable companies, including Toyota Motor Corp., Johnson & Johnson and Sears Roebuck and Co.

In April, the firm won class certification on a case against Bank of America-owned Countrywide Home Loans Inc., which is accused in federal court of misrepresenting terms of its adjustable-rate mortgage loans. *Ralston v. Mortgage Investors Group Inc., et al.*, 08-CV-536 (N.D. Cal., Filed Jan. 28, 2008).

"We don't limit ourselves to one particular type of case," Anderson said. "If a case comes through our door, and it's a type we haven't done before but we like it, we're able to take it."

A lot of work comes through their door, according to Andrus. Part of that is because the women remain on good terms with the much larger plaintiffs' firm Lieff Cabraser Heimann & Bernstein LLP, where they met as first-year associates in 1999.

"As first-year associates, you bond with people," Anderson said, explaining why it made sense to open a firm with Andrus. Anderson said she wanted to branch out because, although the work at Lieff Cabraser was rewarding, she felt limited by its scope.

"There are lots of benefits of being at a large firm, but you don't have a lot of control over the cases you take and the ones you work on all the time," Anderson said. "I was finding I was really, really interested in certain types of cases, but I wasn't getting to work on them as much as I would like."

Andrus, who became a partner at Lieff Cabraser after five years, worked on national consumer class actions and pharmaceutical cases. Anderson worked at the firm for two years on products liability, antitrust, employment and public safety cases before leaving to work as a staff attorney for the Habeas



S. Todd Rogers / Daily Journal

Jennie Lee Anderson and Lori E. Andrus of Andrus Anderson LLP.

Corpus Resource Center in San Francisco. Now five years into their new venture, the pair almost always overlap with the casework they take, they said. One notable exception is antitrust cases, which go exclusively to Anderson.

"Jennie has a great deal more experience at antitrust cases," Andrus said. "I have a greater background in mass torts cases."

Lieff Cabraser name partner Elizabeth Cabraser remembers them fondly.

"I can certainly say that we're pleased and proud at the initiative the Andrus Anderson partners have shown as a women-owned, women-run progressive litigation firm," Cabraser said in an email.

The firm has its challenges, according to Andrus. She said all their casework is 100 percent contingency-based, meaning the two attorneys have to be extra careful to select work that proves itself profitable.

"We tell clients, 'We will work for you, and we will put in our lot with you. We only get paid if you get paid,'" Andrus said. "To do that, we have to make sure we balance the cases and cash flow coming in, so that we can provide excellent legal representation."

Those cases come from all over: friends, referrals from former firms and the Web, which both partners said has drawn a substantial amount of clientele. Anderson said they hired someone to make sure the firm's website is search-engine optimized, meaning it shows up in top Google results when searching for terms like "plaintiffs' attorney." She said the emphasis on the Web was a no-brainer for the firm.

"I think we knew SEO was important because we live in San Francisco," Anderson

Andrus Anderson LLP

San Francisco
Date founded: February 2007
Number of attorneys: 3

said with a laugh.

Andrus said the Web draws clients she wants to work with: people who are good with email and have a motivation to find the firm and to right some wrong they've experienced.

"You can count on [those clients] to get back to you right away and put some effort in their case," Andrus said.

Andrus and Anderson have one associate, with no immediate plans of expansion.

"I do have dinner with my husband just about every night," Andrus said. "Although, it usually means I'm writing a brief while he's cooking."

Anderson said she wouldn't have it any other way.

"The reward is that we really believe in the cases we take," she said. "The personal satisfaction, to me, is more than worth it."

One case referred by Lieff Cabraser to Andrus Anderson was against California State University, East Bay, which in 2009 was accused in Alameda County Superior Court of failing to pay all wages for its non exempt English as a Second Language teachers. *Page Nelson, et. al. v. California State University, East Bay Foundation Inc.* RG09442869 (Alameda Super. Ct., filed March 23, 2009).

Page Nelson, the name plaintiff on the class action, said he felt lucky to have found Andrus Anderson. The school settled the suit by offering to pay for hours worked and allowed the teachers to clarify just how many hours went unpaid. Nelson said Andrus did a terrific job keeping tabs on him and updating him with the case.

"I consider Lori a friend," he said. "I stay in touch with her and send her stories about law and politics."