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Florida Powerhouse: GrayRobinson

By **Nathan Hale**

Law360, New York (July 11, 2014, 3:56 PM ET) -- Flexible, transparent, entrepreneurial, free of bureaucracy — they may sound like idealistic buzzwords when describing a law firm, but these attributes have proved to be invaluable tools to building and growing GrayRobinson PA, according to partners at the Florida firm.

Indeed, through a period when economic turmoil threatened — or sank — other law firms, GrayRobinson blossomed into the largest Florida-only firm and the fourth largest with a presence in the state. It has also secured a place as one of Law360's **Florida Powerhouse** firms.

"We like entrepreneurial lawyers who like to be left alone to practice law rather than be caught up in a large law firm bureaucracy," says President and Managing Director Byrd F. "Biff" Marshall Jr., who has led GrayRobinson for more than 20 years.

That attitude and approach has proved attractive for talent looking to make lateral moves and for smaller firms considering mergers. Since the turn of the century, the firm has roughly quadrupled in size to 280 lawyers, according to Marshall. It has also expanded throughout the state, from two Central Florida offices to 12, including a significant push into South Florida.

The firm eschews excessive bureaucracy, including committees and countless meetings — monthly partners meetings last just 15 minutes, according to Marshall.

"It's a model that works well, and I think it attracts a lot of lawyers," said Mayanne Downs, chair of the firm's litigation department and a former Florida Bar president.

That brevity may be aided by the firm's unusual transparency, which Downs said breeds comfort and contentment instead of resentment. In the firm's open compensation system, every partner receives a daily financial activity report and knows what everyone else is making.

"There's no mystery. You know because you're a partner and you should know," said Tom Loffredo, the firm's Fort Lauderdale managing partner. "It leads to a positive work atmosphere."

The firm also allows its partners — who outnumber associates at the firm — a considerable amount of autonomy and flexibility.

That comes into play with fee arrangements, allowing partners to tailor their practice and workload to their clients, which is more important than ever in the current legal marketplace, with clients still holding an upper hand and applying pressure to keep rates down, Marshall said.

It also has other applications: Downs notes that she works with a number of female attorneys with young children, who are able to cut back on their workloads while preserving the ability to return to the partner track and growth mode when ready.

"You can come to a large law firm with all of the resources, all of the support and broad practice areas, and have an extraordinary amount of autonomy in your practice," Downs said.

GrayRobinson has focused its expansion on areas of law it identified as being in the greatest demand, the firm said.

It acquired Miami-based defense firm Hirschhorn & Bieber in October to beef up its criminal and white-collar defense practice. It also bolstered its South Florida presence in 2013 when Charlie Siemon and Wendy Larsen, previously of Siemon & Larsen PA, joined the firm to launch its Boca Raton office. GrayRobinson has already moved into a larger office space in Boca Raton and set plans for a larger Miami office in 2015 to accommodate the growth of both branches.

GrayRobinson has also targeted specific industries, bringing in three veteran former federal regulators to its nationally recognized alcohol industry team and opening an office in April in Gainesville's Innovation Square, across from the University of Florida, with the aim of tapping into the local technology sector growth.

"The amount of tech and related things that are going to come out of the University of Florida is ahead of the rest of the state," Marshall said, noting that the university has seen more investment in technology research than the rest of the state university system combined.

These moves have helped build on the firm's strengths in litigation, banking, real estate and land use, and lobbying and government relations.

With litigators in every one of its offices, GrayRobinson attorneys can move quickly and with local expertise to handle cases from Key West to Jacksonville, Miami to Tallahassee, and its numerous locations in between.

"I think clients appreciate that, and they know that we can get things done quickly anywhere in Florida," Loffredo said.

The firm's recent clients have been as varied as a Boca Raton synagogue embroiled in a \$3 million estate dispute; Cuban baseball prospect Leonys Martin, who levied allegations of smuggling, kidnapping and extortion against individuals who got him from Cuba to the U.S.; and a Fort Lauderdale diamond broker who won a \$1.5 million judgment against a former partner for embezzlement and other claims.

A team of GrayRobinson litigators successfully represented one of the nation's largest funeral homes in a \$200 million federal class action over alleged improper handling of gravesites at a South Florida cemetery, securing a dismissal that was affirmed by the Eleventh Circuit.

The firm last year also won the dismissal of a \$35 million class action claiming liability against SunTrust Bank for its alleged assistance to a German Ponzi scheme suspect.

It gained summary judgment for Citizens Property Insurance Corp., the state's insurer of last resort, related to claims valued at \$60 million for commissions associated with about 76,000 policies it took over from liquidated insurance companies.

And it landed a victory in federal court on behalf of rapper Curtis James Jackson II, better known as 50 Cent, Tomorrow Today Entertainment Inc. and G-Unit Records Inc. for claims of

copyright infringement and right to publicity against a music executive who used the musician's image and music on a hip-hop website.

Other notable work has included collaborative efforts of the alcohol industry team and government and legislative lobbying practice in representing the Florida Distillers Guild in 2013 to implement changes to state alcohol beverage laws that allowed them limited sales of their products direct to consumers. GrayRobinson was involved in negotiations in both houses of the state Legislature and the governor's office as well as with industry members.

The firm's government relations and lobbying practice ranks if not at the top of the state, definitely within the top two or three.

The team of attorneys and governmental consultants includes Tallahassee managing partner Jason Unger, a former special counsel to the Florida House of Representatives; former Florida Supreme Court Chief Justice Charles T. Wells; former Florida Lottery Secretary David Griffin; and Timothy M. Cerio, former general counsel of the Florida Department of Health.

The firm's ties to government extend throughout the state as well, with many members doing work for agencies and municipal governments.

Downs, who serves as Orlando's city attorney, says that the firm's reputation of being strong on public service and speaking for government played a significant role in her coming to the firm two and a half years ago.

The firm's focus on keeping down costs also comes into play, she noted, saying, "One thing that's always true of working for government is you've always got to do it for less money."

The firm's strong team on the public-sector side also serves as an advantage for its private-sector clients, Loffredo said.

"Maybe a client wants to get a meeting with someone, and they can open doors," he said.

For a firm that opened its doors only in 1970, GrayRobinson has certainly made its imprint on Florida and appears poised to keep pace with the state's rapid growth.

--Editing by Sarah Golin and Edrienne Su.

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