

Richards Layton Elects Its First Female President

By [Rose Krebs](#)

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Law360 (July 3, 2019, 5:22 PM EDT) -- Doneene K. Damon knows becoming more diverse has been a struggle for Delaware's legal community, but her leadership post at her longtime firm [Richards Layton](#) is evidence the First State is making some progress in closing the diversity gap.



Paul M. Altman (from left), Doneene K. Damon and Lisa A. Schmidt.

Damon, who has spent nearly 28 years at the firm, was seated as Richards Layton & Finger PA's first female president on July 1. She also becomes the first African American female to serve as president of one of Delaware's biggest firms, according to a firm news release.

"I joined the firm fresh out of law school," Damon said in an interview with Law360 on Wednesday. "It was a very good fit for me."

Although she acknowledged she has often been the only African American woman in the room during her lengthy legal career in Delaware, she said the First State's tight-knit and sophisticated legal network has been a welcoming and rewarding place to work.

"Once you start to establish yourself, people get to know you," Damon said. She pointed out that there is a "civility" and "rapport" among Delaware's lawyers and judges, who are used to a high level of expertise handling corporate and other matters.

"One of the things that is so tremendous about the community here is we practice what we call the 'Delaware way,'" Damon said. "That expectation goes through the entire fabric of the legal community."

The expectation entails collaboration, a "rapport" among colleagues and handling matters with a certain civility, she said.

"It does distinguish us and sets us apart from other jurisdictions," Damon said.

The tight-knit aspect of Delaware's legal community helped her overcome gender and racial barriers, she said.

"I had phenomenal mentors at my firm," Damon said. "And quite frankly, my mentors didn't look like me."

Damon said that she has seen growth not only at her firm over her career, but in the Delaware community at large as it expands its practice areas. There has also been a trend in becoming more inclusive over the years, she said.

Just in the last year, three female judges have joined Delaware's chancery and bankruptcy courts.

Having "diversity of thought" and more viewpoints in the legal community is important and beneficial, Damon said.

She concedes it has been a "struggle" closing the racial and gender gaps, and that attracting young attorneys of all backgrounds to Delaware and keeping them there is a challenge given the proximity to larger cities like Washington, Philadelphia and New York.

"It's often an interesting challenge to attract good young lawyers to come to a small city like Wilmington when you have cities all around," Damon said. However being smaller, closer and more sophisticated can help attorneys in Delaware learn fast and advance their career, she added.

Damon has served in key roles at Richards Layton, including as co-chair of the firm's business department and chair of the corporate trust and agency services group.

In her work, Damon "counsels clients on formation and operational issues relating to Delaware statutory and common law trusts in all types of commercial transactions, and also represents banks and trust companies in connection with their trust and agency services under Delaware and New York law," the firm said.

She has also held leadership positions in the [American Bar Association](#), the [Delaware State Bar Association](#) and other legal organizations, and serves on several community organization boards.

Damon, who has served the last three years as the firm's executive vice president, said her goals for her three-year tenure as president include expanding professional development programs and establishing a wellness initiative aimed at helping attorneys deal with stress and other issues.

Damon is joined in Richards Layton's leadership team by Lisa A. Schmidt, who is serving as executive vice president, and Paul M. Altman, who was elected to serve as the firm's senior vice president.

"I am honored to have been selected by my partners to lead such an extraordinary firm," Damon said. "Richards Layton & Finger's tradition of excellence is based on a long history of remarkable lawyers and leaders of the Delaware bar. We look forward to continuing the firm's success through our dedication to our clients, our people and our community."

Schmidt represents Delaware corporations, their directors and others in complex corporate litigation, while Altman has served about 20 years as chair of the firm's business department and the limited liability company and partnership advisory group, the firm said.

--Editing by Adam LoBelia.