

Gay lawyers sought for diversity, gay clients

■ Many lawyers are coming out of the closet in small practices and large law firms to help gay and lesbian clients with complicated legal needs.

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Like most expectant parents, McKay Bray and Dayna Shelkey of Fort Lauderdale want to do all they can to protect their family if something horrible happens.

But Bray and Shelkey are lesbians and don't have the same legal rights as married couples. They've hired an attorney to make sure everyone — including Shelkey, the nonbiological mother — is secure.

The couple had no trouble finding one: Many gay and lesbian lawyers today are out of the closet, ready to assist clients who have same-sex partners and children. And large law firms have caught on, too, that top-notch gay staff attorneys can bring in big gay business.

The number of openly gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender lawyers increased by more than 50 percent from 2002 to 2006, reports the National Association for Law Placement.

The nonprofit group, which uses data from about 700 large U.S. law firms, reported 1,733 openly gay lawyers in 2006, up from about 1,100 four years earlier. Openly gay lawyers represent 1.8 percent of associates and 1.1 percent of partners.

Shelkey, 27, and Bray, 31, who used a California sperm bank and are expecting a boy in November, hired Miami Beach attorney Elizabeth Schwartz, a lesbian legal activist who specializes in alternative-family law and whose Miami Beach practice is more than 50 percent gay.

• TURN TO LAWYERS, 2E

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'LAST STRONGHOLD': Lawyer Steven Kozlowski says gay lawyers in South Florida are becoming mainstream.

WORKPLACE

Gay lawyers come out to help gay clients



DONNA NATALE PLANAS/MIAMI HERALD

LEGAL HELP: Elizabeth Schwartz, center, a lesbian legal activist, was hired by Dayna Shelkey, left, and her McKay Bray, who is pregnant, to help ensure that they are secure.

•LAWYERS, FROM IE

"The state of Florida doesn't protect you, so you have to go to someone who has dedicated her professional career to protecting you," Shelkey said of Schwartz.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

In other communities, Schwartz, 35, might be on the fringe. Not here. Last month, she won the Daily Business Review's 2007 Sookie Williams Award for Outstanding Service to the Legal Community, presented at the annual Dade County Bar Association installation dinner.

"Here is a lawyer who's representing a community that's underrepresented," said Schwartz, reflecting on the award. "This was the community saying, 'Keep up the good work.'"

Other prominent South Florida attorneys who specialize in gay-family law include Jerry Chasen of Miami, Dean Trantalis of Wilton Manors and Robin Bodiford of Fort Lauderdale.

Some lawyers still prefer not to publicly identify as gay. One prominent Miami attorney — out socially in the gay community — declined to be named in this article. "Not comfortable. Sorry," he wrote by e-mail.

And some say the legal community is actually behind other sectors of corporate

America when it comes to recruiting gays.

"It's trying to catch up, but it's behind the rest of the corporate world," said Steven Kozlowski, who practices business and entertainment law. "It's traditionally a conservative profession. It's the last stronghold — unless you count the military as a profession."

Large law firms in other parts of the country have begun recruiting openly gay and lesbian attorneys, to diversify the firms and help bring in gay dollars.

For the past five years or so, there has been "an ongoing demand of clients" that the legal profession employ talented minorities, including gay people, said Peter Prieto, executive partner of Holland & Knight's Miami office.

In South Florida, many firms have gay lawyers who are out of the closet.

Florida attorney Dan Bradley came out publicly in a New York Times article after resigning as national president of Legal Services in 1982. He moved to Miami, went into private practice and became an AIDS advocate after being diagnosed with the illness. Bradley, 47, died of AIDS in 1988.

Attorney Greg Baldwin had become the public face of gay South Florida.

About 20 years ago, Baldwin appeared in a local magazine article about "Gay

in Corporate Miami," he recalled.

"They were having trouble finding anyone in any business who was openly gay. It wasn't just law firms," said Baldwin, now 60. "They were tough times. Not tough — scary. A lot of the fear was mostly inside ourselves."

Baldwin, a former assistant U.S. attorney, is a partner at Holland & Knight in Miami, where he specializes in complex commercial litigation and white-collar criminal defense.

Other past and present gay lawyers in prominent local firms with primarily nongay clients include:

- Eddy McIntyre, a partner at Bunnell, Woulfe, Kirschbaum, Keller, McIntyre, Gregoire & Klein in Fort Lauderdale until his death in February.

- Richard Milstein, a shareholder at Akerman Senterfitt in Miami.

- Michael Góngora of Becker & Poliakoff's Coral Gables office.

"As far as I know, I'm the only [openly gay] attorney statewide at Becker Poliakoff," said Góngora, who also is the first out Miami Beach city commissioner. "The gay group is the last of the diversity groups to be sought out at law firms."

Góngora, a 37-year-old Cuban American, is a community association attorney who specializes in condo law.

The number of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender lawyers increased more than 50 percent from 2002 to 2006.

Becker & Poliakoff hired him in April 2005. "I don't see my sexual orientation as a factor," he said. "But it was a plus."

MAINSTREAM

Kozlowski, who is in private practice in Miami Beach, believes gay lawyers in South Florida are becoming mainstream after the industry has been "behind the curve" in embracing gay lawyers.

He is a former board member of South Florida's GALLA, the Gay and Lesbian Law Association. The group, "born out of adversity," now exists only on paper but not for lack of eligible members, he said.

In "Miami, like New York, we're in a post-gay era," said Kozlowski, 37, offering this analogy: "People are complaining there are not a lot of gay bars in South Beach. But it's gayier than ever. People don't need a gay hotel [any more] to cuddle by the pool."

Bloomberg News contributed to this report.