



# BOLD STROKES

## Croke Fairchild Duarte & Beres partners shaking things up

By Melissa Rubalcaba Riske

**F**or a young firm continuing to build a presence and establish itself, a name change may seem risky, bucking the rules of expectations.

But since its founding, the leadership at Croke Fairchild Duarte & Beres hasn't been afraid to toss the rulebook aside. In addition to its name change this year, the firm completed its Women's Business Enterprise (WBE) certification awarded by the Women's Business Enterprise National Council. The certification recognized the firm for being majority-owned by women, as well for the overall diversity of its staff. Partner Jessica Fairchild, a co-chair of the management committee, explained that since more than 60 percent of the firm's attorneys are women, it seemed an easy decision among the founding partners to apply for certification.

"We are investing in women and creating an environment where they can thrive," Fairchild said.

WBE-certified businesses, according to the organization's website, receive access to supplier diversity and procurement executives at many major U.S. businesses and government bodies across the federal, state and local levels. They also get access to mentoring, network events and can use Women Owned and Women's Business Enterprise Seal as a marketing tool.

The firm was officially established in 2019, but the relationships among the partners go back much further. They've worked and climbed the legal ladders together. The idea of a collaboration to build their own firm seemed like only a dream as they carved their individual career paths. But then the time came when they found themselves at the same crossroads — and their vision for a firm came closer to reality.

Equity partner Lisa Duarte's career included private practice and government assignments. Prior to joining the firm, she completed a two-year tenure as the first assistant deputy governor for budget and economy in Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker's administration. Duarte said the appointment was an opportunity to make an impact, but her plan was to return to private practice after two years.

Duarte, who had long been friends with managing partner Drew Beres and Patrick Croke, joined the firm in 2021 — and they were ready to make some changes.

"When Lisa joined, we had the opportunity to restart," Fairchild said. "Changing the masthead and applying for the certification is something older firms would never do."

Croke said firms and businesses generally talk about diversity and promoting women, but rarely does leadership actually invest its money with those values.



**Jessica Fairchild**



**Lisa Duarte**



**Patrick Croke**



**Drew Beres**

"It reflects our values and the direction we had already taken since women were a majority," Croke said. "We try very hard to seek out diversity, employ women and provide real paths to leadership and to invest in our people."

Croke continued: "It was such an obvious decision for our firm and an ultimate goal not just because it's the right thing to do, but because it's consistent with everything we are."

All four founding partners have spent time at large firms and agreed they wanted their firm to be a little different. Some of those differences started with the decision to be a firm where the majority of the owners were women.

"There's a vitality and energy related to it and we love it," Croke said.

For founding partners Croke and Beres, who are men, having women in the majority of the firm's ownership isn't about stepping aside. It's about recognizing the hard work and dedication of their fellow partners' careers.

"We really do see culture as an important part of the business," Croke said. "We have the opportunity to do better, without the legacy chains to be a burden around our necks."

The firm's focus on diversity is visible on its website, with its staff attorneys varied in age, experience and race.

"Having these voices in the room, really does make for better results," Croke said.

### **BUILDING A BETTER PLATFORM**

The partners believe the firm's success hinges on the strong contributions of its staff. Long before terms like "hybrid" were common nomenclature, the firm's leaders encouraged flexibility.

Fairchild said the firm gave its staff the opportunity to define work schedules and roles, whether that be to work part-time, from home or on a limited project basis. It was a practice she had used when she launched her own firm. It proved successful and helped to grow her

practice while employing talented, experienced lawyers who were looking for the opportunity to work with flexibility.

"We want to see our lawyers succeed. We want to help them succeed," Fairchild said. "We ask, 'How do we help you have the career you want?'"

At first glance, the concept seemed a little ahead of its time, Fairchild said. But it enabled lawyers, such as those with limited work schedules who wanted to spend more time with family, an opportunity to remain in the legal profession and contribute their talents and experiences.

"The clients' needs come first, always, but we can still do things in a way that recognizes we're humans," Fairchild said.

The masthead changes and the WBE certification have been well-received among clients, Fairchild said. Duarte added that it has garnered attention from other firms who are considering such moves for themselves.

Duarte said that certifications and statements are great, but they won't matter without a firm's proven ability to serve its clients, whether it is a family business or multi-million dollar corporation.

"First and foremost, we have to be good lawyers," Fairchild added. "This is another way to differentiate ourselves for our clients."

Fairchild said that when she struck out on her own in 2010, she realized she was leaving a large firm at a time when she could have been a leader among peers. But it was a move she needed to make, even as she considered how it would affect those she left behind. In creating her own firm, she made a conscious effort to be part of the evolution of how firms operate within their staff structure and culture.

"How can I make a difference? How can I help others and pave a way in this firm?" she asked. "That's why I am so energized. We are making a difference, creating opportunities for attorneys. It's been an evolution, but I feel I am at a place that I was destined to be. We're here to be better. A stronger firm is one where everybody is happy, everybody feels valued, and everybody is here working the way they want."

[melissa.riske.1@gmail.com](mailto:melissa.riske.1@gmail.com)