

How I Made Firmwide Managing Partner: 'Be Open to New and Creative Solutions,' Says Maria Ginzburg of Selendy Gay Elsberg

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By Tasha Norman

Maria Ginzburg, 51, Selendy Gay Elsberg, New York.

Practice area: Litigation and investigations.

Law school and year of graduation: Stanford Law School, 1996.

How long have you been at the firm?

I have been a partner at Selendy Gay Elsberg since its founding—we are in our fifth year.

How long were you a partner at the firm before being promoted to firm leadership? I have been a partner at a firm for 22 years. Yikes, that sounds like a long time, but it has gone by quickly.

Were you a partner at another firm before joining your present firm? I was a partner at Kirkland & Ellis for eight years. I left in 2011 and joined Quinn Emanuel, where I was a partner until 2018, when I left to start this firm with 10 other former Quinn Emanuel partners.

What year were you promoted to your current position at your current firm? I have become the managing partner just this year.

What's been the biggest change, day-to-day, in your routine since becoming a leader at the firm? After the isolation of the pandemic, becoming the managing partner has been very energizing, because I am in touch with so many more of my col-

leagues. As a litigator, it is easy to become laser-focused on the demands of your cases and devote all your energy to your case teams and clients. As the managing partner, I am still running a full caseload but with the added leadership role I have layered in meetings with my fantastic COO, CFO, partners and firm business heads on all the issues of the day. I am also spending more time with associates on firm initiatives—for example, we have just launched a parenting forum to help attorney parents navigate the demands of career and kids. I have two teenage daughters and want to pass on whatever insights and parenting war stories that might help the next generation maneuver this juggling act.

On a personal level, the pandemic has taught me that I am a people person—I really value my business relationships, and Zoom is not an adequate substitute for me. We are now back in the office a majority of the time. The joy of having meetings and seeing my colleagues face to face has not worn off yet.

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in elevating you to your current position? I am fortunate to practice with partners I have known for a very long time—some of us started together as associates decades ago. My partners know my



Courtesy Photo

Maria Ginzburg.

good and bad traits, which span from loving Excel spreadsheets to singing extremely out-of-pitch karaoke without shame. I was a “baby” investment banker before I went to law school and have always enjoyed the business side of the practice. Over the last few years, our firm has matured from a startup to a robust business with over 100 employees, and I am grateful my partners have had the confidence to give me the reins to lead the firm on the next leg of our journey.

Who had the greatest influence in your career that helped propel you to your leadership role? I would start with our firm's former managing partners Jennifer Selendy and David Elsberg, who bravely led our firm in its founding years. Luckily their offices are down the hall, and I can bend their ears for advice when I need to. The same holds true

for Philippe Selendy and Faith Gay, who had the vision and passion for legal excellence that compelled this firm's existence. Growing up as a young lawyer at Kirkland, my former partner Alex Dimitrief was an amazing mentor and more recently a client. He was a fantastic trial lawyer who left Kirkland to become the general counsel of General Electric. He now serves on boards of public companies and teaches at Harvard and New York Law School. Alex taught me not just how to litigate but also how to take risks in my professional career. I value my formative years at Kirkland tremendously, but shaking things up by moving to Quinn and then founding this firm has made the biggest difference in my career.

Lawyers tend to be conservative by nature—at least compared to decision-makers in the business world. We learn how to excel in our given frameworks—whether it is a courtroom or a law firm structure. But for me, changing and innovating the framework itself has been most rewarding. In starting Selendy Gay Elsberg, we really tried to rethink and build a better lawyering model—and commit to rebuilding it continually. We are constantly focused on improving ourselves—whether it's improving service to clients or associate training or maintaining a positive culture during the pandemic. That potential is what drives me to be a leader.

Knowing what you know now what advice would you give to yourself? Take more risks. My family emigrated out of the former U.S.S.R. when I was 5 years old. We came to the United States literally with a few suitcases and then some boxes full of Russian blankets and a few plastic dolls came later by boat! Both of my parents were scientists, and while they worked for big institutions—a university and a national laboratory—they also started their own

biomathematics consulting firm. And so, I saw small business entrepreneurship firsthand. I confess, their brave path was scary to me, and I ended up making more traditional career decisions at first. I majored in government at Harvard, joined an investment bank on Wall Street, then went to Stanford Law School, clerked on the Second Circuit and joined Big Law. There's nothing wrong with pursuing a traditional legal career path, of course, but I am most proud of all of the attorneys here who took a chance and founded this firm.

What's an accomplishment that you are proudest of? While the vast majority of our cases involve thorny commercial disputes between sophisticated players with high stakes, we purposefully dedicate a significant amount of our time to public interest cases and pro bono work. I am really proud that our firm doesn't just talk the talk, but we walk the walk when it comes to having direct impact on the world. Some of our key accomplishments in this regard include: reaching a national settlement that will help public servants navigate student loan forgiveness; helping relocate over 400 at-risk Afghan girls and their families fleeing the Taliban to safety in Canada; and securing a landmark Supreme Court decision which reaffirmed the centuries-old principle that “no citizen, not even the president, is categorically above the common duty to produce evidence when called upon in a criminal proceeding.”

What's the one characteristic that you believe every firm leader should possess? An open mind. Leaders need to be willing to hear all sides of an issue before making a decision—not come to the table with a predetermined answer. And for firms like ours where we push ourselves to be innovative, there's even more value to



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being open to new and creative solutions.

With D&I in mind, how can women better position themselves for leadership roles in law firms? When I was a very young banker 30 years ago, before I went to law school, I traveled on a “roadshow” with the management team of a company that was going public. My job as the junior-most banker was to do everything from financial modeling to procuring a daily supply of cigars for the management team. I was the only woman on the deal team, and I thought “this is just the way it is” (which it was at the time). I vividly recall sitting across from the CEO on our chartered plane, telling him I had been accepted to Stanford Law School and asking for his career advice—he had started as a lawyer. He said, “Maria, you need to get into a position where you are making decisions, not just executing them.” That was good advice 30 years ago, and is still good advice today. But luckily there are more women in positions of authority today doling out advice to young professionals.

I often suggest that young attorneys work at firms that give them opportunities to make decisions on cases, take lead roles in developing strategy and argue in court. If you are not getting those opportunities, ask for them. If that doesn't work, *take a risk* and go somewhere that will give you the runway you need to prove yourself.