

# CORPORATE COUNSEL

An **ALM** Website

corp.counsel.com | December 2018

## National Women in Law Awards

### RECOGNIZING TRANSFORMATIVE LEGAL LEADERSHIP

These profiles recognize North American women general counsel, in-house leaders and law firm partners who have demonstrated extraordinary leadership and business acumen as they have guided their organizations through often treacherous roads to success. These women stand out because they are business strategists, complex problem-solvers, and of course, great lawyers. And as important (especially to them) is that they are great leaders of people: They care more about the success of the team than their individual success.

### MARIE DISANTE

#### LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

**MANAGING PARTNER,  
CAROTHERS DISANTE & FREUDENBERGER LLP**



WHEN MARIE DISANTE, MANAGING PARTNER OF CALIFORNIA-BASED Carothers DiSante & Freudenberger LLP, started her legal career in the late 1980s, mentors and leaders in big law firms were mostly men. DiSante made diversity and inclusion a top priority when she started her own firm and vowed she would mentor and create leadership positions for women and minorities within the firm.

Timothy Freudenberger, one of the firm's founding partners, said DiSante takes her role as a mentor to younger attorneys very seriously. "She wants those associates to rise up the ladder and become partners," Freudenberger said. She has "an incredibly high level" of integrity and ethics, he said. "She's an outstanding role model."

DiSante, the daughter of an Italian immigrant, grew up in Allentown, Pennsylvania. Although DiSante's father ended his schooling when he was in the seventh grade, she said that education was very important in her family. "That was a big impetus," DiSante said.

DiSante, one of the first members of her family to go to college, said a couple of her professors at Texas Christian University told her she had what it took to be successful in law school because she wrote well and had good analytical skills. She enrolled in Southern

Methodist University School of Law, graduating in 1988.

Her first job after graduating was with Latham & Watkins in Orange County, California. DiSante said Latham had been recruiting on the SMU campus and took an interest in her. She said she was ready to leave Texas and accepted the firm's offer. But Latham began deemphasizing its employment practice, which she preferred, and she was being pushed toward business litigation, DiSante said. After four years with Latham, she moved to the boutique firm of Payne & Fears.

In 1994, DiSante joined a group of attorneys to found Faustman, Carlton, DiSante & Freudenberger LLP. That firm became Carothers DiSante & Freudenberger LLP. "I had great partners when I started out and still do," DiSante said.

In the beginning, there were four partners and three associates with a vision of becoming a statewide firm. Freudenberger said he and DiSante were in their sixth year as lawyers when they started the firm. The firm today has five offices located in Los Angeles, Orange County, Sacramento, San Diego and San Francisco. Its more than 45 attorneys focus on labor, employment and business immigration employment matters.

Having diversity in leadership at the top has helped with the firm's goal to be diversified,

DiSante said. That includes having a female managing partner, and an African-American who is another named partner in the firm.

DiSante has been at the helm of her firm since its inception and her ingrained value of inclusion and goal of further diversifying CDF has resulted in its diverse workforce. Today, the firm reports, more than 60 percent of its attorneys are women and/or minorities. "Organically, we've always had a strong mix of minorities and women and that promotes diversity," DiSante said.

Fifty percent of CDF nonpartner attorneys are minorities, while 32 percent of all CDF attorneys are minorities, and one-third of its equity partner management committee is minority and female, the firm reports. Freudenberger said DiSante "spearheaded the drive" for flexible work schedules for CDF attorneys. "Marie convinced us of the importance of that," he said.

DiSante said, "We individually talk to people about what they need. We definitely work out different arrangements for people based on what works for them and works for our clients. We're also flexible if people want to work from home some of the time. With modern technology, we can do that."

Because the firm allows flexible schedules, it has been able to keep many talented attorneys who need time to be with their families, Freudenberger said. ■



Reprinted with permission from the December 2018 edition of CORPORATE COUNSEL © 2018 ALM Media Properties, LLC. This article appears online only. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited. For information, contact 877-257-3382 or reprints@alm.com. # 016-12-18-02