

EXCLUSIVE: Riley Safer Elects First Black Female MP

By **Natalie Rodriguez**

Law360 (April 18, 2018, 8:12 PM EDT) -- Riley Safer Holmes & Cancila LLP has elected its first African-American female managing partner, potentially marking a racial barrier-breaking first for the industry, Law360 has learned exclusively.

In a unanimous vote last week, name partner Patricia Brown Holmes, a former Cook County Circuit Court associate judge, was elevated from her position as co-administrative partner. The firm says it believes Holmes is the first female African-American managing partner of a law firm with a national presence and more than 50 lawyers that is not women- or minority-owned.



Patricia Brown Holmes

While there have been a number of black male lawyers in such positions and while there are black female lawyers in leadership roles near the top, Law360 data suggest Holmes is the only female African-American helming a major law firm. Inquiries to several lawyer groups turned up no historical data suggesting that anyone has broken that barrier in the past.

Holmes told Law360 she went into the partner vote expecting to be nominated for the next-highest position. But fellow name partner Ron Safer, whom Holmes said she expected to take the top job, nominated her instead.

"It was quickly seconded, and before I knew it there was a vote," Holmes told Law360.

The turn of events puts Holmes, whose resume also includes serving as an assistant U.S. attorney and an assistant state's attorney, at the head of a fast-growing firm with a national presence. Holmes said that she was honored by the partners' trust in her and that she was dedicated to furthering the two-year-old firm's early growth and successes.

"I know I have an extremely supportive firm to make sure this is a successful venture," Holmes said.

The Chicago-based firm launched in March 2016 with 21 lawyers who jumped from Schiff Hardin LLP. It has grown to 73 lawyers, including 37 partners. Along with the Chicago, New York and San Francisco offices with which it began, it has added a base in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The partnership vote was part of a change toward a more formal management structure, the firm said.

The firm's growth is unlikely to stop anytime soon, according to Holmes.

"We aren't looking to expand sheer numbers, but our clientele base is demanding more and more from us and giving us more responsibility," Holmes said. "As a result it's requiring us to expand in a way that supports the client. We are looking at a potential expansion in a few cities."

Holmes would not name potential targets for growth, as the firm is still weighing its options, she said. She added that the firm will likely expand some of its practice groups, such as its corporate department, in the relatively near future.

Since its inception, the firm has embraced diversity. Fifty-two percent of all its attorneys are women, and 29 percent are minorities. Among its 37 partners, 15 are women and 12 have minority backgrounds, according to the firm.

"We are enormously proud of our diversity for one primary reason: quality. We have a richer talent pool to solve our clients' problems because we are more diverse than any majority-owned law firm in the country of our size. That we have the first African-American female leader is a source of tremendous pride to the law firm and to its clients," Safer said.

Safer says Holmes has several qualities — from her communication style to her vision for the firm — that make her the right leader.

"She has the ability to picture a future for the firm in which it thrives in an increasingly competitive environment and to help people reach that vision," Safer said.

Holmes said she hopes her elevation to managing partner will inspire other attorneys of color — particularly women — to rise into leadership positions.

Just as the first African-American partner in a law firm paved the way for more African-American partners across the industry, Holmes hopes her ascent will lead to other women of color taking the helm of law firms.

"One day I'm hoping I'll find that there are others and we can have a little club. It's a big responsibility, so I have to do it right," Holmes said. "I can't fail. That weighs heavily."

--Editing by Peter Rozovsky.