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LAW FIRM BUSINESS

## Sister Act

Siblings Polina Friedland Bernstein and Diana Friedland, partners at Bernstein & Friedland, P.C. in Encino, handle employment litigation and work on every matter together.

Ryne Hodkowski  
Daily Journal Staff Writer

In June 2011, two years after starting her own law firm, Polina Friedland Bernstein's practice got busy enough to necessitate another attorney. Wanting to have a partner whom she could trust and with whom she could share a common goal — the characteristics Bernstein believes are key to having a successful law partnership — she called on someone who'd be a perfect match: her sister.

"I always imagined that she would join me after she had about eight years of experience," Bernstein said of her younger sister, Diana Friedland, who had just spent three years at Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP. "But she's very smart, dedicated and has strong skills in seeing the details, whereas I'm more of a big picture type of person."

"More importantly, I know that I can trust her without any doubts whatsoever."

The two sisters now run Encino-based Bernstein & Friedland, P.C., handling both plaintiff and defense side employment litigation and working on every case together.

'When you have a small practice and small business clients, you feel like you're part of their business.'

— Diana Friedland

While Bernstein focused solely on defense-side employment litigation in her eight-year stint at big firms Winston & Strawn LLP and Dewey Ballentine LLP, she quickly began taking on contingency-based plaintiffs work upon opening her own firm.

And despite starting her practice without any pre-existing clients, she remained very selective when taking cases on.

"Having come from the defense side, I knew that companies really do try to be compliant and that the law is very narrow as to what constitutes an illegal employment action," Bernstein said. "By

being extremely conservative, I was able to get good results in all of [my cases]."

After finding success on the plaintiff's side, Bernstein returned to her roots and began handling defense work for small- and mid-sized businesses. Still, the firm today represents plaintiffs more than half of the time.

Working alongside each other comes natural for members of the Bernstein family. Bernstein's parents immigrated to the United States from Ukraine, bringing five-year-old Bernstein with them. Friedland became the first member of the family born in the U.S. a couple of years later. In the late 1980s, their father and his brother launched their own business, which Bernstein said has been thriving ever since.

"If my dad could start his own business with no education, no knowledge and speaking no English, then there shouldn't be anything stopping me from having a successful, long-term practice," Bernstein said. "We appreciate what our parents did, and we want to be that first generation of professionals in the United States."

Just before hanging her shingle, Bernstein had three children under the age of four. Commuting from the San Fernando Valley to downtown and meeting a big firm's demanding billable hours requirement meant that she couldn't be both a successful large firm attorney and a successful mother, she said.

So she began looking for a company within five miles of her house where she could do fulfilling work. And in a moment that she said is "etched in her mind," Bernstein quickly realized that she would have to create such a place.

"I couldn't imagine being miserable for many more years, which is the way I imagined being if I continued working in Big Law," she said.

Choosing carefully the plaintiffs' cases that she took, Bernstein began focusing mainly on disability discrimination, age discrimination and pregnancy discrimination cases, as well as cases involving employees who were termi-



Hugh Williams / Special to the Daily Journal

Polina Friedland Bernstein and Diana Friedland, sisters and partners at Bernstein & Friedland, P.C. in Encino.

nated when they complained about their work conditions. During the beginning of her solo practice, Bernstein would routinely call her sister at night to discuss her day at work. It was during these conversations that Friedland's interest in working with her sister was piqued.

"She was calling me on her way home from work and talking about mediations she had been in and the great results she got for her client," Friedland said. "It was scary to leave the safety net of Big Law, but the feelings she was expressing were feelings I had never experienced."

The sisters are quick to compliment one another and finish each other's sentences. And they play off each other's strengths at work. The two agree that Bernstein is stronger at visualizing the bigger picture in a case, whereas Friedland is better at micro-managing and will typically write the first draft of a brief.

Above all else, however, the sisters are most proud of the fact that they're two young women litigators running their own firm where often they are also representing women.

"I feel that we're doing something that a lot of other young women are not able to do," Bernstein said.

They are also reluctant to grow the

firm any further, as they enjoy being able to handle every facet of a case. Bernstein said that the two are still developing as attorneys, and that by handling everything, they're becoming stronger practitioners.

Additionally, the attorneys feel that by remaining so involved in their client's matters, they are better able to empathize and understand their needs.

"When you have a small practice and small business clients, you feel like you're part of their business," Friedland said. "I want to keep it small so that we can give all those clients attention. I always know what's on a client's horizon, and I give attention to each case because I don't have 1,000 of them on my desk."

The sisters said they have remained close outside of work. They said that they can turn off the switch between work and personal life, and that Friedland will often visit Bernstein's house on Friday nights.

The nightly phone calls, however, have subsided.

"We used to call each other every day and ask how each other's day was and sympathize with each other. Now, she's the last person I want to talk to at the end of the day, and she doesn't sympathize with me," Bernstein joked.