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## 5 Questions With Icard Merrill's 1st Female President

By **Madison Arnold**

Law360 (February 7, 2022, 11:18 AM EST) -- Icard Merrill Cullis Timm Furen & Ginsburg PA announced last month that Telese L. Zuberer was becoming the firm's first-ever woman president, taking the reins of leadership from Robert G. Lyons, who had held the post for 23 years.

The Sarasota-based firm has been operating in Florida for almost 70 years. Now, it's in a time of transition to what the new president likes to call the "third generation" of attorneys and a period of growth, just like some of the largest firms that are taking hold in the state of Florida.

Zuberer said her firm needs to grow in both its Sarasota shop and its Lakewood Ranch office. It's planning a summer intern program as well as looking at filling lateral positions to help accommodate a high demand for legal services in Florida.

Zuberer's practice focuses on not-for-profit community associations, such as condominium and homeowners associations. She joined Icard Merrill as a shareholder in 2017 after 13 years at McKay Law Firm PA, which she co-founded and operated.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

### What piqued your interest in leading the firm?

The firm was established in 1953, so we're about 70 years old. And we are a generational firm. Icard and Merrill, for example, the attorneys that you see on the website now of that name, they were not the originals. They're second generation.

You've got this second generation, which is starting to look into transitioning. And so the role of what we'll call the third generation of attorneys at the firm here is we'll take a different look at the way things are going, where we want to move in order to basically follow the market and the culture of the way that this is done now — which will definitely have some differences and some changes — while trying to maintain the core values, the mission statement and the integrity that the firm originally set up upon.

### What have you been seeing as far as demand and growth for firms your size, especially as the larger firms are expanding in Florida right now?

We're recognizing now that a lot of the recruitment of the way we can grow, develop and work with our clients can be done in a different way than our firm and probably most law firms have been used to dealing with clients and with the business of law.



Telese Zuberer

A lot of it is transitioning into a culture that we can be more available to our clients if we don't always have to meet in person, if we don't want to have to reserve a conference room space or if we don't have necessarily a formal letter on letterhead or not attending hearing up at the courthouse.

And some of that's a generational gap and change in the way that our business has been around for some of the years, looks at the way we can grow and develop. And some of it's just the way businesses are generally as you are constantly changing and going into a third generation.

We've got an opportunity to look at the way our infrastructure is and keep the things that are working and develop and change for things that we could be doing differently that would make us better.

## **What does this "third generation" have envisioned for the firm in the immediate future as the world moves on from the pandemic?**

Ironically, we are doing office renovations, which is a little different, but it's going to give us a fresher look. We're consolidating some of our office space.

We're also at this point where we've got a good number of attorneys that are working at least partially remotely, with a few working almost entirely remotely, and the same thing with staff. So we are revamping and re-freshening up the office space and figuring out a way that we may not need so much space.

We will be able to recruit attorneys, and even service clients, that are not here in our physical, local area. So that has been both a different mindset, and then implementing that has been quite a bit of a change.

And then it ends up being a cultural change too. How do we keep the integrity of the firm as a group of pretty tight-knit individuals? And they'll have the availability, not to necessarily see each other in the hall all the time, so we've got more flexibility from working remotely and working from home for servicing our clients and other methods other than just meeting in a conference room.

So the culture is the understanding of how people work, what's important and how they communicate. We are re-looking at that and making changes, probably along with most businesses, but for a firm that's always done it this way, It's a big step for us.

## **What is your approach to leading the office and working with this third generation of attorneys?**

I think it's a lot more of a collaborative approach than perhaps has been used in the past. I really believe that people do their best work if they're enjoying what they're doing in the way that they're doing it.

So if we can find the right buttons to push to allow people to be at their best, that's going to bring out the best productivity and give a sense of satisfaction. So some people enjoy coming into the office, working with clients during a certain area of law. And others will want more flexibility.

When I graduated from law school, we had 1,800-hour billable requirements, and I had to be in the office in my seat before my boss came in. That's not necessarily going to need to be fulfilled anymore. Doesn't mean that we don't work hard or as much, it just may be that we work smarter or differently.

## **What sort of message do you hope your appointment as the first female president of**

## Icard Merrill will send to the rest of the firm?

Ironically, I never felt like there was ever a glass ceiling. So I would like to think that the firm generally didn't always have that appearance. But I think that would be unrealistic to think that it didn't, because it was a fairly male-dominated firm.

But it's 70 years old. You're going to have that. We think about when it was started in 1953: the only women that would have been coming in the door at that time are the ones that were going to be the support staff for the male attorney.

It's just very, very rare to have a female attorney that would even go to law school. So with the rich history, to some extent, is going to set the expectation that the females coming into the firm are going to be support staff and then certainly not necessarily rising to the level of shareholders, and now for the first time holding the office of the president.

So I would say at this point, it should show and does show that it doesn't matter [who you are]. There wasn't a quota to fill. It was the right person for the right position, and everyone embraced it. I never had an issue of feeling like I was being pushed into this situation or this opportunity because there was a need or [it was for] showing that the firm was inclusive, as much as it was a need that the firm had that I was able to fulfill.

--Editing by Alyssa Miller.

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