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Gordon & Rees partner opens new firm with Chicago attorneys *Steals Gordon & Rees' Sara M. Thorpe in SF for California managing partner*

By Joshua Sebold
Daily Journal Staff Writer

A San Francisco-based Gordon & Rees LLP partner has left to help start a new firm, where she is now the managing partner of its two California offices.

Sara M. Thorpe, who served as managing partner of Gordon & Rees' San Francisco office in prior years, is a name partner at Nicolaides Fink Thorpe Michaelides Sullivan LLP, a boutique that will focus solely on representing insurance companies. She will be in charge of its Los Angeles and San Francisco offices.

The new firm launched Jan. 2, featuring 30 Chicago attorneys, 29 of whom split off from Bates Carey Nicolaides LLP, along with Thorpe, two associates from Gordon & Rees' San Francisco office and one associate from Sedgwick LLP in Los Angeles.

Richard H. Nicolaides Jr. is managing partner of the new firm, having brought nearly half of his attorneys from Bates Carey, which previously had more than 70 attorneys and doesn't have any offices outside of Chicago. He will also serve as managing partner of the 30-attorney Chicago office.

Thorpe said she had been thinking about forming an insurance-only firm for a long time to eliminate conflicts and had worked with Nicolaides and other attorneys at the Chicago firm several times over the last few years both as local counsel on cases involving mutual California clients and on speaking engagements.

"The first day I called my clients and disclosed my move, they sent me a new assignment that I would not have been able to take at Gordon & Rees due to conflicts, which to me demonstrates that this is going to work," she said.

Thorpe said she hopes to expand the San Francisco office from three attorneys to five or six over the next two months and add a second attorney in the Los Angeles office.

"I've already gotten calls from interested laterals that have work," she said. "We would like to add more areas of expertise, ERISA and more life insurance, possibly other insurance areas." Nicolaides said having offices in California would help his attorneys expand their national practices.

"The idea of being able to build a firm based on talent specific to our area of focus but not necessarily limited by geographic location is very appealing to us," he said.

Thorpe's practice focuses on environmental insurance, including asbestos and other toxic claims.

"They're large and complex because there are multiple parties involved, many insurance companies, many layers of insurance and many insurance issues that haven't been decided by the courts yet," she said.

Nicholaides said his attorneys also have significant experience working on unique cases that deal with issues of first impression. The firm won an appeal in March determining that its client, National Union Fire Insurance Company of Pittsburgh, Pa., didn't have to defend Chiquita Brands International Inc. against tort claims that the company funded paramilitary groups in Columbia.

Gordon & Rees firmwide managing partner Dion N. Cominos said he knew Thorpe had been thinking about taking on a leadership role in an insurance-only firm for some time and wished her luck.

"On a personal level, she is really going to be missed," Cominos said. "She was a very high quality practitioner and a very good friend over the last 20 years and I have nothing but the highest regard for her."

Cominos said his firm has roughly 25 insurance attorneys working out of San Francisco and the practice will continue normally.

Both Cominos and Thorpe said they expect to continue referring clients to each other's firms and collaborating on matters.

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