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The flowers arrived at Mayer Brown days after a prized new hire started at the law firm’s New York office.

“Thanks for taking him,” the note on the bouquet read. It was signed: “The women.”

Mayer Brown partners had begun getting calls earlier that February day about James Tanenbaum, a veteran capital-markets attorney, a person familiar with the matter said. They learned he left his previous firm, Morrison & Foerster, in December after sexual-harassment allegations.

Mr. Tanenbaum, 70, resigned from Mayer Brown the next week, shortly after the firm began an investigation, the person said.

It wasn’t the first time he had switched jobs following misconduct allegations. Morrison & Foerster hired him in 2003, soon after he paid a settlement to a female lawyer who accused him of sexual harassment at his longtime firm Stroock & Stroock & Lavan, a Stroock spokesman confirmed.

Mr. Tanenbaum “forc efully denies any claims of improper conduct,” his spokesman said.

Staying SilentA survey of predominantly legal industryemployees showed a reticence to reportsexual harassment.Source: Working Mother Research Institute andAmerican Bar Association Journal online poll of3,000 adults, majority in the legal industry,conducted in March

WomenMenExperiencedsexualharassmentReported theincidentSomeoneelse reportedthe incidentClaim wastakenseriously bytheorganization0%255075

Law firms stand out in a corporate landscape where rainmakers accused of bad behavior often receive second and third chances, according to interviews with dozens of lawyers, legal recruiters, consultants and leaders at some of the country’s largest firms.

Firms’ sole assets are lawyers and their client relationships. As demand for work from the biggest law firms has softened since the financial crisis, poaching top partners has become one of few ways to boost revenue.

Many firms ask about prior complaints in new-hire questionnaires but do nothing to vet the answers, lawyers say. Firms rarely ask partners for references at their old firm, for fear of alerting competitors a star lawyer is in play.

“It can be particularly difficult to find out about misconduct in the legal industry,” said Christine Chung, a partner at New York-based law firm Selendy & Gay who has been involved with hiring lateral partners from big law firms for almost a decade. “If the person left the old firm for a bad reason, you may not figure it out.”

Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher partner Jeffrey Reeves departed in December after an investigation into sexual-harassment allegations, the firm said.

Mr. Reeves was the partner in charge of the firm’s Orange County, Calif., office in October 2015 when co-workers saw him making out with a junior associate at a Las Vegas nightclub during an office retreat, current and former Gibson lawyers said.

The incident prompted the office to hold mandatory sexual-harassment training and stop serving alcohol at monthly partner lunches, some of the lawyers said. The firm stripped Mr. Reeves of his leadership role in early 2016, though he stayed a partner.

In August 2017, Mr. Reeves called a female associate into his office after going to lunch with her and having several glasses of wine, people familiar with the matter said. He locked the door, dropped his pants, pushed her into a chair, put his hand on the back of her head and made her perform oral sex, they said, adding that she emerged crying after a partner knocked repeatedly on his office door.

An attorney for Mr. Reeves said Mr. Reeves “adamantly denies that any such incident occurred and is shocked by the allegation.”

A Gibson Dunn spokeswoman said the firm “promptly investigated allegations when they were brought to our attention in December and acted swiftly” in response, resulting in Mr. Reeves’s departure.

Slow ClimbPercentage of women partners at law firmsSource: National Association for Law Placement

%WomenMen2000’05’10’15020406080100

Mr. Reeves, who had worked at Gibson Dunn for 26 years, quickly joined litigation boutique Umberg Zipser in January. The next month he moved to a different boutique, Theodora Oringher.

Dean Zipser and Thomas Umberg, founders of Umberg Zipser, didn’t respond to requests for comment.

Theodora Oringher Chief Executive Todd Theodora said Mr. Reeves has always been candid and knows his new firm’s policies around how to treat colleagues. “Jeff has been living up to his strict and solemn promises to us,” he said.

While firms often have human-resources departments and antiharassment policies, partners—more than 75% of whom are male across the industry—control the workflow and career development of those beneath them.

“Too often, those doing the harassing are in positions of power, making it unlikely that the harassment will ever be reported,” said Jamie Quient, who spent a year as president of a San Diego women’s bar association campaigning against law-firm harassment.

Many firms strive to dole out fair punishments for misbehavior, and partners have had careers derailed because of harassment allegations.

Fox Rothschild forced a New Jersey partner to resign last year after an internal investigation into allegations of inappropriate behavior, said Thomas Paradise, the firm’s general counsel. Mr. Paradise said Fox Rothschild didn’t know to which firm the attorney was moving until his last day and wasn’t contacted for a reference. Though the partner denied many of the allegations, the firm “advised him to disclose to his new firm the reasons for his departure,” Mr. Paradise said.

The partner, said people familiar with the matter, is litigator N. Ari Weisbrot, who moved to Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner in May 2017.

Bryan Cave wasn’t aware of the allegations when it hired Mr. Weisbrot, co-chair Therese Pritchard said. She said the firm began an investigation after an inquiry from the Journal and that as of May 2018 he was no longer with the firm.

Mr. Weisbrot said he is legally constrained from commenting on his departures.

Separately, Mr. Weisbrot tried to forcibly kiss a female attorney in a restaurant parking lot after interviewing her for a job at Fox Rothschild, a person familiar with the matter said. Mr. Weisbrot denies the claim, which he said the firm didn’t raise with him. Fox declined to comment.

BY THE NUMBERS

* 25%: Proportion of women in law firm governance roles
* $190,000: Starting salary at most large law firms
* $1.77 million: Average 2017 profits per equity partner at the nation’s 100 largest law firms
* $91.4 billion: Total 2017 revenue of the nation’s 100 largest law firms
* 21,864: Number of partners who joined the 1,200 largest U.S. law firms from 2014 to ’18

*Sources: National Association of Women Lawyers; the firms; the American Lawyer; Legal Compass*

As in other industries, law-firm management can be reluctant to punish partners who generate millions of dollars in business.

Mr. Tanenbaum was considered a rainmaker during his long career.

Women who worked with Mr. Tanenbaum in the past two decades at Stroock and Morrison & Foerster said in interviews he created an uncomfortable work environment by giving them impromptu shoulder massages, kissing them on the forehead and, according to some at Morrison & Foerster, asking them to “spin around” for him while commenting on their bodies and clothing.

Mr. Tanenbaum’s spokesman said he denied giving massages and that he touched colleagues’ foreheads with his hand or forehead if they said they might have a fever. Mr. Tanenbaum asked female colleagues to turn around if he saw an “interesting detail on the side and back of a new dress” and complimented men and women on their appearance because clients expected them to be dressed appropriately, the spokesman said.

A former Stroock associate said she didn’t request to work on certain deals to avoid Mr. Tanenbaum, after he kissed her forehead and massaged her. “I didn’t want to feel like I had to compete on my appearance rather than my work,” she said. She said she didn’t report his actions.

He sometimes asked women to stand back-to-back with him when they wore high heels, touching his rear end to theirs, female colleagues said.

One former Morrison & Foerster associate said she stopped wearing heels after this happened multiple times. Around 2011, she raised Mr. Tanenbaum’s behavior with firm partners, who reacted by joking about it, she said. That feedback “suggested no one really is going to take this seriously,” she said.

Morrison & Foerster declined to comment on the former associate’s remark.

At Stroock, a female associate accused Mr. Tanenbaum of unwanted touching and making sexual comments, said people familiar with the matter. The complaint resulted in a settlement he personally paid and led to his 2003 departure from Stroock, said a Stroock spokesman.

Soon after, he started working at Morrison & Foerster, whose top management had no knowledge of the settlement or prior allegations, said Keith Wetmore, the firm’s then-chairman.

Mr. Tanenbaum’s spokesman declined to confirm whether he paid a settlement, and said the “alleged accusations” were “untrue.” He said Mr. Tanenbaum left Stroock for business reasons. He provided a list of former colleagues to the Journal, most of whom said they never saw Mr. Tanenbaum behave inappropriately and that he helped promote women.

“He never made me feel uncomfortable,” said Lailey Rezai, who worked with Mr. Tanenbaum as an associate for two years. “If anything, he gave me confidence in every situation.”

Morrison & Foerster disciplined Mr. Tanenbaum at least twice after formal complaints were made about his behavior, a person familiar with the matter said.

The firm said it hired an outside law firm late last year to conduct an investigation after receiving additional complaints. The firm asked Mr. Tanenbaum to leave after the investigation, it said, and has “no tolerance for that kind of behavior.”

Mr. Tanenbaum’s spokesman said investigators didn’t interview women who worked closely with him. He said Mr. Tanenbaum believes the firm’s intent was to get him to retire and prevent him from competing at another firm, which Morrison & Foerster strongly denied.