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AMERICAN LAWYERKim Koopersmith a 'Leader Among Leaders'  
and 'Soul of the Firm' as Akin's Chair

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### What You Need to Know

- Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld Chair Kim Koopersmith is The American Lawyer's Distinguished Law Firm Leader for 2024.
- Under her leadership, the firm grew its revenue by 65.3% from 2013 to 2023, added a number of new offices, and expanded its international footprint with more than 20% of its lawyers located outside of the U.S.
- As a leader, Koopersmith takes the time to get to know each person at the firm.

Kim Koopersmith had a clear mission in mind when she stepped into the chair role at Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld in 2013 as the first woman elected to lead the firm.

"I wanted to see the firm soar in its performance and standing and reputation, and I wanted to do all of that while strengthening the culture of the firm," she said, adding the firm also "wanted to have a more global presence."

Under her leadership, the firm grew its revenue by 65.3% from 2013 to 2023, added a number of new offices, and expanded its international footprint with more than 20% of its lawyers located outside of the U.S. The firm posted record financials in 2023.



Courtesy photo

### Kim Koopersmith, chairperson, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld.

And, important to Koopersmith, the firm has been a leader in diversity, equity and inclusion, and in pro bono, with lawyers devoting about a million hours to pro bono work during her tenure.

Koopersmith, a litigator based in New York, is The American Lawyer's Distinguished Law Firm Leader for 2024.

Jim Benjamin, a partner in New York who is a leader of the white-collar defense and global investigations practice group, said Koopersmith is an effective leader because she articulates a strategy and sticks to it. For instance, he said, she identified core practice areas—such as financial services, government, and energy—for growth.

“She’s just kept her eye on the ball at all times. In particular, the firm’s growth internationally has been remarkable,” he said.

She knows every partner, what each partner does, and their clients, he said.

“She is in the weeds of what the lawyers in this firm are doing every day. It creates success,” he said.

But while the Dallas-founded firm’s financial success since 2013 and its growth show that Koopersmith has attained many of her initial goals as leader of the 892-lawyer firm, she said she is most gratified at how the firm and its lawyers and staff embraced “open and honest” communication during the pandemic.

“We have created those very deep strong roots to be able to continue to prosper and be an example of what lawyers can do right in a world that has so many profound issues going forward,” she said.

Guiding the firm through the pandemic, in fact, was Koopersmith’s biggest challenge, she said.

She wasn’t sleeping well during that time, and had a habit of spending that middle-of-the-night time sending emails to the firm expressing her feelings and how she expected others were feeling. After rereading the email responses recently, Koopersmith said, she was gratified that so many said it was one of the things that helped them get through the challenges of that time.

“There was no communications team involved. It was just Kim awake at two o’clock in the morning reflecting on what I was thinking,” she said.

### **‘Dual Threat’**

Koopersmith was serving as U.S. managing partner for Akin in 2012 when she was elected chair of the firm, effective April 1, 2013. Her U.S. assignment, she said, included the significant challenges of dealing with the 2007-08 financial crisis.

She said that the economic crisis provided her with a “real understanding of where the firm was and where it should be going.”

Early in her time as firmwide chair, in 2014, the vast majority of lawyers in Bingham McCutchen’s London and Frankfurt offices, along with lawyers in Hong Kong, joined Akin, which provided a boost to the firm’s international presence. London is now Akin’s third-largest office, and since then the firm has doubled the number of offices it maintains internationally, and 20% of its lawyers are based outside of the U.S.

Sebastian Rice, the head of Akin’s London and Geneva offices, said Koopersmith devoted a large amount of energy to making the Bingham McCutchen transaction happen.

“No detail was too small,” Rice said, adding that Koopersmith’s work on the deal over months was “an education on how to manage and how to lead.”

From 2013 through 2023, the firm increased its lawyer head count by 10.3%, but its revenue by 65.3%. Profits per equity partner improved by 71.4%, and revenue per lawyer by 49.8%.

Over the last three years, the firm has advised on transactions and litigation for clients including Adler, Angelo Gordon, Apollo Global Management, Blackstone, BMS, Cineworld, Crayhill Capital Management, Crestline Partners, Diamond Sports, Excelsior Energy Capital, GoldenTree, ICONIQ Capital, Intrum, Johnson & Johnson, KKR, Meta, Neuberger Berman, OpenAI, Paine Schwartz Partners, Palliser Capital, SpaceX, SVB Financial Group and Vitol, according to the firm.

And, with Koopersmith leading the firm, Akin was one of the first firms to appoint a chief DEI officer, and it established firmwide resource groups for diverse communities, expanded the DEI council to include senior partners, and launched the Strauss Diversity and Inclusion Scholars program and the Pro Bono Scholars program, both for diverse students.

Also, the firm was named to The American Lawyer's A-List eight times in nine years, received 16 consecutive perfect scores on the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Corporate Equality Index for LGBTQ workplace equity, earned four consecutive Mansfield Certification Plus certifications and the Women in Law Empowerment Forum's Gold Standard Certification from 2018 through 2023, and advanced to 12th place on The American Lawyer's Diversity Scorecard.

While Koopersmith executed on the firm's strategy during her tenure, a number of Akin partners interviewed for this story were quick to discuss the chair's ability to develop personal relationships with everyone at the firm.

"I think about Kim as being a dual threat, and I mean being responsible for propelling the firm to incredible financial highs ... and at the same time, she's also the soul of the firm," said Scott Barnard, a member of the firm's management committee who is partner-in-charge of the Dallas and Fort Worth offices. He also called her "a tireless champion for diversity and commitment for pro bono."

"Kim is one of those unique people in the industry who is leading an extraordinarily large organization, but everyone in the firm feels like she knows them," he said.

That dynamic is important to Koopersmith.

"Knowing who the people are that make the firm work, and having them feel comfortable knowing you, is a big part of my success, and however you are going to become a leader, don't forget who you are serving," she said.

Katherine Goldstein, an Akin partner in New York who is co-head of the white-collar and government investigations practice, describes Koopersmith as a truly gifted leader who is "absolutely flawless" in her approach to leadership, bringing humanity to every decision.

Because of Koopersmith's ability to connect with everyone, "it also means that everyone realized that they have a seat at the table, that they matter," said Melissa Schwartz, a partner in Washington, D.C., who is a member of the firm's DEI Council and the management committee.

Leaders of other Big Law firms admire Koopersmith's accomplishments, too.

Bradley Butwin, chair of O'Melveny & Myers, said Akin's "astronomical rise" under Koopersmith's leadership is shown through the financial numbers.

However, he said, she is "a leader among leaders" adding that he has gone to her for clear-headed advice, particularly during the troubling times early in the pandemic.

"She has a very strong moral compass and a keen sense of right and wrong. She's genuine. She's authentic. She's real," Butwin said.

Julie Jones said that, after she was tapped in 2018 as Ropes & Gray's incoming chair, Koopersmith reached out to welcome her as a fellow woman leader of a large law firm.

"Not only was the outreach so kind, but the thing about Kim is she backs up her moments of welcome with actions. What was a friendly call turned into lunches and ... conversations. She's definitely that sort of person who you feel like is cheering you on from afar," said Jones, who went to become her firm's chair in January 2020.

Next April, London corporate partner Daniel Walsh and New York financial restructuring partner Abid Qureshi will succeed Koopersmith and serve as co-chairs of the firm.

At that time, Koopersmith said, she plans to spend more time with her new grandson and— noting that she went to law school to become a public interest lawyer—focus on non-profit work. She serves on the board of Equal Justice Works and TEAK and is co-chair of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.