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THOROUGHLY MODERN MILLIE

How a Mysterious Mascot Helps This Firm Foster an Award-Winning Culture

BY ELIZABETH MILLARD

When members of the California Psychological Association paid a visit to San Francisco-based Rogers, Joseph, O'Donnell & Phillips to assess whether the firm was a psychologically healthy workplace, they probably weren't prepared for Millicent. But that doesn't mean they weren't glad to meet her.

The woman who's been dubbed "our mythical founder, Millicent," is actually a portrait of an unknown Victorian-era grand dame that was purchased at a garage sale and hung in the office as a joke. Yet over the years, she has become a firm mascot of sorts.

Millicent manages to send birthday flowers to employees, provide cookies in the office's kitchen, deliver frequent lunches and even whip up Monday morning breakfasts. Every Halloween, at least one employee arrives in picture-perfect Millicent couture.

This lighthearted approach to employee perks was part of the reason that the state organization recommended that its parent group, the American Psychological Association, recognize the 32-lawyer firm. As part of a new national program, the APA awarded the firm and 14 other companies its first "Psychologically Healthy Workplace" award last October.

According to the APA, the award is presented to companies that demonstrate innovative programs and policies designed to foster a healthy work atmosphere. Rogers, Joseph was the only law firm among the award recipients, which ranged from Small Dog Electronics Inc. in Vermont to Texas-based Southwest Airlines.

Of course, the firm didn't snare the award based solely on the good deeds of an oil painting. Rogers, Joseph also offers lawyers and staff myriad benefits designed to foster work-life balance, like liberal parental leave options and part-time options that don't take attorneys off the partnership track.

It's all part of the culture designed to make life a little easier for a group of people that works very, very hard. "We're not just standing around the cookie jar all the time," says Allan Joseph, co-chair of the firm's government contracts practice group and treasurer of the ABA. "We have a responsibility to our clients outside the firm, but inside, we like to have a closer relationship among our colleagues."

Joseph, an ex officio member of the *ABA Journal* Board of Editors, may be emphatic about the importance of the firm's work, but he's far from the office killjoy. He is known to keep a desk drawer full of toys. Whenever an employee brings in children, the drawer quickly gets

ransacked.

"You should be here at spring break, when everyone brings their kids in," says managing shareholder Margot Wenger. "They all find their way to Allan's office."

The desire to have an environment where all at the firm enjoy their workday requires dedication and vigilance, says Neil O'Donnell, co-chair of the firm's construction law practice group. Sometimes, it even necessitates some reprimands for those who don't agree with the approach. Joseph notes that in the past he's had to tell some fairly senior people to lighten up—or else.

"There are decisions that shouldn't be made on economics alone," O'Donnell says. "Although providing a good place to work ultimately makes us a success financially, that's not why we do it. We want it this way because it's a matter of simple decency and respect."

Undoubtedly just as Millicent would have wanted it.

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