

Florida Powerhouse: Akerman

By **Madison Arnold**

Law360 (August 8, 2022, 2:02 PM EDT) --Akerman LLP has defined the last year by its ability to adapt to the ever-changing legal industry and its demand in the Sunshine State, leading to one of the best financial years ever for the firm and securing its spot on Law360's Florida Powerhouses list for yet another year.

Beth Alcalde, an Akerman employee benefits partner and a member of the firm's executive committee, credits the firm's success to its attorneys' ability to pivot from the COVID-19 pandemic to a booming legal market, making it one of the Florida Powerhouses winners. Many leaders are realizing the "return to normal" after the pandemic they had originally expected never happened and likely won't in the future, she said.

"We are fundamentally different as individuals, as family members, and professionals, as advisers and counselors to all clients, than we were before and that's not going to change," Alcalde said. "One of the opportunities for leaders at Akerman and at other firms in this state is to really challenge the good that comes from flexibility, from respecting everyone as professionals to be able to make decisions about working conditions in which they are able to perform well and to do well for their clients, even if we move away from sort of traditional models of engagement on a day-to-day basis."

Akerman has been a mainstay in the Florida legal community for more than a century. In the Sunshine State alone, the firm has 352 of its 736 employees, as of May, located in nine offices stretching from Miami to Tallahassee.

The Florida shops are located in Boca Raton and West Palm Beach, both led by Christopher S. Duke; Fort Lauderdale, headed up by Leslie Miller Tomczak; Jacksonville, with Christian P. George at the helm; Miami with co-office managing partners Neisen O. Kasdin and Luis A. Perez; Naples, led by George W. Powell Jr.; Orlando, led by Ginny Childs; Tallahassee, headed up by Bruce Wiener; and Tampa, led by Irene Bassel Frick.



Beth Alcalde Michael Marsh Luis Perez

"We work seamlessly amongst our offices. We have teams that work from New York, from Los Angeles, from Miami," said Perez, the Miami office co-managing partner who is also chair of the Latin American and Caribbean practice. "What I do is mainly dispute resolution, which entails international arbitration and litigation. And my paralegals, for example, in this case, were located in Washington, D.C. My second chair attorney was located in New York. So we put together the best team that we can to represent the client's interests, no matter where they are physically."

Over the years, Akerman has had a hand in many of the notable deals and projects that have helped shape life in Florida, including a Walt Disney World land purchase, funding for the first public rail system in Central Florida called SunRail, and the formation of the bank that later became SunTrust Bank, which the firm said is one of the largest bank holding companies in the U.S.

"We have this mix of long-standing tradition, knowledge, foundation, and solidity, but then also, we have, at the very fiber of our being, this entrepreneurial spirit, the nimbleness, this real culture of celebrating our colleagues," Alcalde said. She added that the firm is often trying to anticipate the future needs of clients and grow its benches in those practice areas, so it can be ready for when clients do have those needs.

Just in the last year, Akerman has represented big-name clients such as Facebook, a Walt Disney Parks and Resorts affiliate and even the Champlain Towers South Condominium Association following the tragic Surfside condominium collapse in June 2021.

Akerman attorney Michael I. Goldberg was appointed as receiver for the condominium association in July 2021 and the firm has since worked to obtain the nearly \$1 billion settlement announced May 11 in a class action over the disaster. Goldberg also led the negotiations on the \$120 million purchase contract for the site, and oversaw all expert testing on the site and interfacing with all governmental entities.

The firm also represented Lake Nona Land Co. LLC as land use counsel in the sale of about 60 acres of land in Orlando's Lake Nona community. The sale was to an affiliate of Walt Disney Parks and Resorts U.S. Inc., which plans to develop the property with a new regional corporate campus that will be home to more than 2,000 professionals relocating from California, the firm said.

As co-counsel with Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP, Akerman represented Facebook against victims of the 2016 Pulse nightclub mass shooting. The victims had alleged "the shooter was self-radicalized because of content posted on the defendants' social media webpages," Akerman said. The case was ultimately dismissed after the Eleventh Circuit found Facebook and other social media companies could not be held liable for aiding and abetting under the Anti-Terrorism Act.

Michael C. Marsh, an executive committee member and partner based in Miami, has been with Akerman since 1999. He credits the year of success in Florida to the people and culture the firm has fostered over the years.

"When you have the leadership style and culture that we have, our people are going to want to give toward the law firm. They're going to get deeper in their expertise, get deeper in their skill sets. They're going to want to separate themselves and distinguish themselves from a skill level, from a substance level. They're going to invest in the firm," Marsh said. "That will move the firm forward in ways that I

don't think organizations see when they're not focused on their people, and so that's who we are. That's our distinguishing factor. I think our folks want to be here. The folks that are here want to be here, the folks that are here are committed to Akerman's excellence."

--Editing by Lakshna Mehta.

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