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Florida Powerhouse: Akerman

By **Nathan Hale**

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In a year when the nation experienced adversity on multiple fronts, Akerman LLP showed why it has been a near-perennial selection as one of **Law360's Florida Powerhouses**, maintaining a high level of performance while also taking on those challenges headfirst to benefit its clients and the community.

As Akerman's CEO and Chairman Scott Meyers put it, the firm's members "came together to meet the moment." In addition to compiling notable achievements across a variety of practice areas, the firm also devoted significant resources and energy into developing an online Coronavirus Resource Center and establishing the Akerman Racial Justice Initiative to address issues of inequity that seized the national spotlight.

"You had the global pandemic, you had the economic recession and you had the widespread social unrest. And through all of that, we were willing to continue to serve our clients at the highest levels, we protected our people and we continued to give back to the community," Meyers told Law360. "It was an extraordinary team effort, and that's what makes Akerman such a special place."

Akerman has long held a prominent spot among Florida law firms, dating back to its founding in Orlando more than 100 years ago. Through the years, the firm has played a role in numerous major developments in the state, including the routing of Interstate 4 through Orlando and Walt Disney's subsequent land purchase in the area for Disney World. It also provided counsel in connection with the creation of SunTrust Bank's predecessor's SunRail system in central Florida, the privately owned Brightline passenger rail line and Miami's Brickell City Centre, which is home to the firm's current headquarters.

As of May 1, the firm had 354 attorneys — out of a total of 715 — located in its nine Florida locations: Boca Raton, Fort Lauderdale, Jacksonville, Miami, Naples, Orlando, Tallahassee, Tampa and West Palm Beach.

The Sunshine State "continues to be very important to the overall footprint of the firm," Meyers said. "We remain very committed to our resources, our partners and our associates — our team — in Florida."

Akerman's coverage across the state was evident in several notable matters last year.

On May 6, 2020, amid pandemic-driven lockdowns, partners Marcy L. Aldrich and Katherine E. Giddings took part in the **first slate of virtual oral arguments** ever held before the Florida Supreme Court, representing State Farm Insurance Co. and Tampa-based medical marijuana company Florigrown LLC, respectively.

Akerman attorneys helped Facebook **fend off** multiple rounds of claims in federal court from 62 plaintiffs alleging that the tech giant aided and abetted an international terrorist act in the 2016 Orlando Pulse nightclub mass shooting.

The firm also **guided** the owner and operator of Miami's eco-adventure Jungle Island theme park through the process of winning city commission approval for a special area plan that permits the development of a hotel and new attractions.

"Akerman has long been recognized for our depth and breadth of real estate and land use expertise in the state of Florida," West Palm Beach-based partner Beth Alcalde said, referring to the firm's Jungle Island-related work. "So that was a really interesting sort of entitlement-based representation."

In a more recent development, following the deadly June 24 collapse of the Champlain Towers South building in the town of Surfside, partner Michael Goldberg was **appointed** this month as receiver for the condominium association.

An example of Akerman's reach into Latin America came in its representation of Spanish renewable energy company Dominicana Renovables, in a dispute with the Dominican Republic over its investment in a wind farm in the Caribbean nation. The firm is seeking confirmation of a \$2.34 million award for sunk costs, plus interest and certain legal costs, while **challenging** the tribunal's denial of a larger claim for lost profits.

Other notable achievements in the last year included work for longtime client Miami-based private equity firm Trivest Partners LP, data management firm NuWave Solutions in its acquisition of BigBear Inc., Adsync Technologies Inc. in its successful defense against a \$35 million trade secrets theft claim, Jet Support Services Inc. in a recapitalization with a private equity firm, and environmentally friendly packaging manufacturer Karat Packaging. Inc. in its \$72.7 million initial public offering, according to the firm.

Alcalde, who specializes in tax law, pointed out that the firm was also busy advising clients on the new tax credits related to federal COVID-19 recovery funds and has been involved in litigation related to the federal Payback Protection Program. She said she expects to see ongoing litigation arising from these recent federal programs.

For all these highlights, the firm's greatest impact this past year likely came through initiatives to assist clients and the community in the face of the pandemic and widespread social unrest.

A coronavirus task force, helmed by consumer financial services practice chair Bill Heller, set out with an internal focus of protecting employees and ensuring operations continuity, but it quickly grew into a firmwide collaboration that extended its attention outward.

"We've learned to appreciate our Akerman teamwork even more — and to recognize our responsibility to serve communities outside our firm and have a role in our country's battle against the pandemic," Heller said.

In March 2020, the firm launched its online Coronavirus Resource Center, featuring insights from lawyers across different practices, interactive maps tracking state and local executive orders, and updates on key court rulings and related news.

"Feedback from clients confirms our approach to blending science, public health and law into accessible posts kept them informed about issues and facilitated their direct follow-up with our lawyers to stay in front of the nonstop challenges coronavirus presents," Heller said.

Within those efforts, Alcalde and labor and employment practice chair Eric A. Gordon led a team in the creation of the Akerman Return to Work Resource Guide, building a library of resources for employers, including checklists, policies and protocols, training programs for managers and contract considerations.

"I felt that many of us viewed this past year as a moment in our professional lives that is probably unlike any other, meaning we were truly standing side by side with our clients in their moment of need, in our moment of greatest vulnerability, in sort of this shared experience that comes from just having to take a deep breath and try to do right by our teams, by our people, by their families," Alcalde said.

Those sentiments could also be applied to another major community-oriented effort that the firm launched in 2020. Responding to the police murder of George Floyd and similar incidents that sparked nationwide social unrest and conversation over racial injustice, the firm in September announced the Akerman Racial Justice Initiative, through which it pledged to help dismantle systemic racism in the justice system.

The firm is actively participating in the Law Firm Antiracism Alliance with several other groups, including Promise of Justice Initiative and Rising for Justice. In Florida, Akerman attorneys have represented clients in Section 1983 cases to advocate for people of color who have suffered excessive use of force by law enforcement, the firm said.

"It is amazing to me that, in light of everyone trying to manage not only their workload, but their personal lives, throughout COVID, there was an overwhelming volunteerism to support and get involved with these activities to try and really make a difference," Meyers said.

--Editing by Steven Edelstone.

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