

A Step Ahead: Associates Start Mayer Brown Walking Group

By Tracey Read

Law360 (April 24, 2024, 12:51 PM EDT) -- Samantha Bellina and Maura McKeon are both first year litigation and dispute resolution associates at Mayer Brown's New York office.

They also share a love of physical fitness, both having run the New York Marathon in 2023.

In order to keep their stress levels down while working long hours in BigLaw, they started going on regular weekly walks together in the middle of the workday.

After joining the firm's New York Women's Forum last fall, they attended a session on how women experience burnout at a much higher rate than men because of the expectations and gender roles placed upon them.

Bellina then got the idea of a walking initiative that would allow women lawyers to engage in physical activity and socialize with others while still contributing to their firm development hours. They pitched it to the firm's affinity group.

In January, Bellina and McKeon officially formed the New York Women's Forum Walking Group to give women a space to focus on self-care. Once a month, the group walks to Central Park while discussing career development, mental health and current events.

"This was the brainchild of a Women's Forum event that got a bunch of first years talking," Bellina said. "Everyone was intrigued by the idea of how exercise and walking is a great way to tackle burnout."

Bellina said the idea began as how exercise in general helps mental health.

"As we were discussing it further, we realized that walking is easy to implement," she said. "You can do it in the middle of the day. You don't need to change, you don't need to put on running sneakers and shower, and it's a simple process. It also allows you to build connections because you're not panting or in the middle of a yoga class, where you have to be quiet."

The group sets aside about an hour each month to walk up Sixth Avenue, do a small loop in Central Park and then walk back to the office — sometimes stopping for lunch somewhere.

"It's been a really great way to just chitchat about everything from life at the firm and concerns we have



Samantha Bellina



Maura McKeon

to the 'Love is Blind' reality TV show," Bellina said. "We build a lot of connections that you don't get through a lot of the more formal lunches or meetings and even cocktail hours."

Bellina said they try to start off with one headliner conversation that may be difficult to bring up naturally. For instance, the first walk centered on everyone's thoughts on an NPR podcast that discussed how 2023 was the Year of the Girl in the wake of the success of the "Barbie" movie, Taylor Swift's record-breaking Eras concert tour and other women making huge strides in media and elsewhere.

"So far we've had some cold, rainy walks so we haven't spent too much time setting up a picnic or anything," she said. "But we're hoping when the summer interns come in we can maybe make it into more of a 'we'll pick up lunch and sit down' when we get to the park and have a little prolonged time."

Any member of the Women's Forum, including non-attorney staff, associates, council and partners, is invited to participate in the Walking Group.

"We think that it's been a great way to kind of remove barriers and have conversations and friendships," Bellina said. "For instance, on one walk I was between a partner and someone from the [public relations] group, and it was just really fun that I'm a first-year associate and this partner has been here forever, and this person is not even a lawyer and none of that matters. We all were having the same conversation and had the same shared experiences."

McKeon said the walking group has also been a great way for her to expand her network at the firm while doing something she enjoys in her personal life. She added that it's been great to connect with women in different practice groups that she likely would probably never have worked with otherwise.

"I think it's really a great professional tool for younger women particularly to get to know people in a situation that is a lot less pressure than some of the more formal mentoring events," McKeon said. "Some walks we have 20 women and some walks we have five and no matter the size, I always get something out of the walk."

McKeon said people at all levels of Mayer Brown have expressed their support of the walking group.

Lisa M. Ferri, co-chair of the New York Women's Forum and global co-chair of the firm's intellectual property practice and life sciences group, said she loved the idea of the walking group offshoot immediately.

"In past years, we might have been more inclined to do lunches or drinks after work or wine tasting to get together," Ferri said. "It's really been wonderful to have this new, kind of unique way for us to get together and mentor each other."

Ferri said she's enjoyed being able to give one-on-one advice to junior attorneys on career paths and work-life balance while doing a wellness activity.

"There has been the exact opposite of pushback on this," Bellina said. "It has been just complete and utter support. Even some men are like, can we sneak in on a walk or two? It's really amazing and I think it shows we're very lucky to be a part of this firm culture at Mayer Brown."

--Editing by Alyssa Miller.