

ORLANDO Business Journal

Dec. 4-10, 1998

Commercial Real Estate & Construction

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Orlando Business Journal
FOCUS

Commercial Real Estate

& CONSTRUCTION MONTHLY

Dec. 4-10, 1998

Women in construction law

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TOP



Photo and design
by Bethany Taylor-Myers
Pictured L to R: Christi Underwood,
Rosemary Hayes, Leslie O'Neal, Clara-
margaret Groover and Kim Ashby.

By TARA KELLEY Contributing Writer and ALEX FINKELSTEIN Staff Writer

ORLANDO — One of the largest jury awards in Florida's construction industry history — \$23 million — has been won by Leslie King O'Neal of Holland & Knight's Orlando office.

After six litigating years, an appellate court on Sept. 3, 1998, upheld the verdict for Martin County government against Centex Rooney Construction Co.

Martin County sued the general contractor, alleging the new Stuart courthouse building was environmentally "sick."

O'Neal filed the suit in 1992 and went to trial in 1996. A 1997 jury came in with a verdict of \$20 million for the county and \$3 million in attorney's fees for Holland & Knight. Now Centex Rooney is appealing the \$3 million verdict.

"I have a copy of the check for the \$20 million plugged into my computer to remind me of the biggest case I have won to date," says O'Neal. "I don't think I'm going to see another one like that for a long time."

O'Neal's landmark victory is only one example of some of the gargantuan legal and non-legal issues being tackled and resolved daily by members of an exclusive informal "club" comprised of the top five women construction lawyers in Central Florida.

They are among the most visible female attorneys *Orlando Business Journal* could find who practice construction law exclusively in Central Florida.

The "club" is not really a club, although all five lawyers have known each other professionally and socially for years. The lawyers are:

■ Leslie King O'Neal, head of Holland & Knight's national practice team for construction law and chair of the governing committee of the American Bar Association's Forum on the Construction Industry. In practice: 20 years.

■ Rosemary H. Hayes, a partner at Winter Park-based Vose & Blau and chair of the Na-

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This article appeared in the 15:27 issue of Orlando Business Journal on Dec. 4, 1998.

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