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Local women's biotech group chapter is launched

By John Flynn Rooney
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A group of women, including two local attorneys, has started the Chicago chapter of a professional organization for women involved in the life science industry.

Women in Bio's Chicago Chapter recently held a kick-off cocktail reception attended by 65 people, said Li-Hsien Rin-Laures, a Chicago attorney and chairwoman of the local chapter. The group aims to increase awareness and foster career development, especially for women in Illinois interested in biotechnology innovation and commercialization.

"I've been amazed by the response," said Rin-Laures, a partner with Marshall, Gerstein & Borun LLP. "I think there is a real need here."

Rin-Laures learned of the Women in Bio group at the 2010 Bio International Convention, hosted by the Biotechnology Industry Organization, in Chicago during May. She attended a Women in Bio reception and met a couple of the group's leaders.

"I was just really impressed with this organization because it has a lot of experienced women, a lot of successful women," said Rin-Laures, who also has a medical degree and focuses her intellectual property practice on therapeutic products, including medications.

Rin-Laures then volunteered to begin a Chicago chapter, which has met three times since last summer.

One of the women Rin-Laures contacted was Sara D. Vinarov, a partner concentrating on patent law with Quarles & Brady LLP's Chicago office.

Vinarov, who also has a Ph.D. in biochemistry, moved to Chicago from Madison, Wis, about 18 months ago.

Joining Women in Bio's Chicago chapter "gave me the opportunity to get involved in the biotech sector in Chicago and to help young women advance their careers in science," Vinarov said.

Elise M. Neils, a director of Ocean, Tomo LLC's Chicago office, said Vinarov contacted her and told her about the



Marina Makropoulos

Li-Hsien Rin-Laures, a partner at Marshall, Gerstein & Borun LLP and Women in Bio Chicago Chapter chairwoman (right), spoke to an audience during the chapter's networking event Thursday.

formation of the Chicago chapter. Ocean Tomo is an intellectual property merchant bank.

"The networking opportunities aren't as strong for women as for men," said Neils, who attended law school but now places monetary value on intellectual property for transactions and licensing, and also personally invests in intellectual property. "That's why I was excited to get involved in a women's group."

The group's local chapter currently comprises 26 paid members and a mailing list with about another 75 names, Rin-Laures said.

The local group also has created several committees.

The steering committee members include senior executives from global companies, women from the investment community, academia and from start-up companies. Rin-Laures said.

At last week's inaugural event, Rin-Laures said she introduced 13 committee members.

Neils said she was handed about 20 business cards from women who attended the event.

"These are women I probably otherwise wouldn't have met," Neils said. "I'm always looking for resources to call and talk things through and that's what this organization is providing for me."

Neils, a member of the sponsorship committee, said the initial sponsors of the Chicago chapter are the Marshall, Gerstein firm; Quarles & Brady; Brinks, Hofer, Gilson & Lione; McDonnell, Boehnen, Hulbert & Berghoff LLP; Ocean, Tomo and Sikich Investment Banking.

The guest speaker at the recent event was Neena Schwartz, a Northwestern University professor emerita who co-founded the National Association for Women in Science, Rin-Laures said. Schwartz talked about her own career and stressed the importance of women working together to foster their career development, Rin-Laures said.