

SPWLA MEMBER PROFILE

MC SUNGAILA

B.A. Stanford University 1988, J.D. UCLA 1991

Civil Appellate Lawyer

A Career Can Turn on a Dime, for the Better

Mary-Christine Sungaila, a civil appellate lawyer and partner in the nation's largest all-appellate law firm, Horvitz & Levy, credits the arc of her career to one particular case -- a U.S. Supreme Court case that she contributed to when she was 29 years old. It was an extraordinary opportunity. MC was working at another large law firm (Irell & Manella in Newport Beach, CA) and was asked by a former colleague to write an amicus brief in support of cert (i.e. a friend of the court brief urging the Court to hear the case). MC's former colleague was a lawyer at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Alabama, which became one of their clients on the brief (he was both a client and co-counsel on the brief). The case involved women's rights -- a civil rights action against a former Tennessee judge who had raped and assaulted female court employees and litigants in chambers. MC had six days to write the brief. Working with her colleague, they helped to get cert granted (the Court agreed to hear the case) after which they wrote a merits brief in conjunction with the Court's substantive review of the issues. MC and her colleague helped to win the case -- a symbolically important victory where it was established that the justice system will intervene to protect women and girls, and that such rogue behavior and misuse of power will not be tolerated. This was the first appeal that MC had taken the lead on handling, and success was sweet. "I figured I had a talent for this type of work," MC said. "And if I got significant training and experience, I might get even better!" Fresh off the Supreme Court win, she joined Horvitz & Levy, where she has built her practice for nearly a dozen years.

MC feels blessed with skilled and collaborative colleagues, and she is pleased to be making a living doing what she likes best: Combining writing, storytelling, and big picture analysis to effect real legal and policy change at the state and national level,



often through a single case. While lawyers at the firm are procedural specialists and substantive generalists, MC concentrates her work in two areas: Complex toxic tort (involving chemical exposures in the workplace or environment) and product liability litigation (including the standards for admitting expert testimony), and women's rights litigation. The toxic tort cases require complex analytical analysis, and often provide the opportunity for building the law across individual cases. For example, a few years ago her firm was involved with the issue of what standard should be used for determining the admissibility of expert testimony in California state trial courts. As each of these cases went up on appeal, MC and her colleagues represented either the defendants in those cases or weighed in with friend of the court amicus briefs to urge that the law be interpreted as they proposed.

MC does pro bono work as well, focusing on women's rights litigation. For the past 13 years, once or twice a year, she takes on a case for free in the appellate courts. MC has handled U.S. Supreme Court cases involving student-on-student sexual harassment and the constitutionality of the civil rights remedy of the Violence Against Women Act, as well as consulted on countless others. In 2008, she filed her first international human rights brief before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The case is a potentially groundbreaking one against the United States for failing to enforce a domestic violence restraining order which led to the murder of the original plaintiff's three daughters. The brief, filed on behalf of more than 30 local, national, and international women's and human rights organizations, international law clinics and law professors, argued that the world consensus in international law is that domestic violence violates the basic human rights of women and children and that nation states must provide effective protection from such violence. The Petition is still pending.

Last October, the two aspects of MC's practice converged on a single day. In the morning, she presented oral argument for her client, Chevron, before the Delaware Supreme Court (a benzene exposure case). That afternoon, she attended the human rights hearing in Washington, D.C. before the Inter-American Commission. MC felt that the day encapsulated the range of her practice – both paid and pro bono – and caused her to reflect on how happy and privileged she is to be doing both the select women's rights cases that she wants to work on and the complex tort cases.

In April, MC learned that she will be preparing a brief in the Inter-American Court in support of the claims of three mothers of girls raped and murdered in Ciudad Juarez Mexico. The claims are against Mexico for failure to protect, investigate or prosecute. Widespread violence against women and girls has been occurring in Ciudad Juarez for more than 15 years and the problem has been the focus of human rights reports by Amnesty International and the Inter-American Commission itself.

Building on her commitment to make the world a better place for women, MC has served on various arts and women's rights boards. Currently, she is an advisor to the Claremont Graduate School's Department of Arts and Humanities. She is also board president of Break the Cycle, a national organization focused on educating and empowering teens to avoid and escape dating violence.

MC spent her elementary school years in Northern California, high school in Orange County, and some of her childhood in Michigan as well - "long enough to have adopted some Midwest values," she said. "Values such as being reliable and solid; being honest, hardworking, and family oriented." MC credits her parents for providing excellent examples. When MC was little, her father went to business school while working full time. She said, "He showed me the power of persistence and hard work, and that you could change your career if the one you had turned out not to be as fulfilling as you had hoped." When MC was older, her mother went to work as a realtor in residential properties, managing to balance work and home life "without a whole lot of fanfare -- she just did it." She showed her daughter that women did not have to choose between work and family, between a meaningful contribution to the world at large and dedication to family.

In her time off, when MC is not helping the law and social policy to evolve, MC enjoys physical activity -- and lots of it. Rock climbing, boxing and kickboxing, indoor rowing, and yoga on the beach are among her favorites. She also enjoys the performing arts and travel. She loves to observe how people in other cultures conduct their lives -- "it opens us up to new ways of being," MC said. Last year, MC traveled to Italy in May and Hong Kong in November. The latter trip was a last minute celebration for her father's birthday. "When your father says that all he wants for his birthday is to have dinner at his favorite restaurant in his favorite city in the world, you just drop everything and go."

MC Sungaila on SPWLA

SPWLA fulfills a crucial role for professional women in Los Angeles. It provides a forum for smart women from across professions to meet. I have been a member of the board of Women Lawyers of LA for a decade -- it has provided me with wonderful contacts with a number of women lawyers and judges whom I otherwise never would have met in my practice. SPWLA plays a similar role in introducing women from different professions to one another.

This SPWLA Member Profile is part of a series of profiles written by Diana Sedenquist.