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## MEET THE WOMEN RAINMAKERS!

Mary-Christine (M.C.) Sungaila  
Interview by Susan Letterman White

**Name:** Mary-Christine (M.C.) Sungaila  
**Firm Name:** Snell & Wilmer  
**Address:** 600 Anton Blvd., Suite 1400, Costa Mesa, California 92626  
**Phone:** 714 427-7006  
**Nominated by:** Susan Letterman White  
**Practice area:** Civil Appeals, Writs, and Related Trial and Pretrial Consulting



M.C. Sungaila is a partner and co-leader of the firm's West Coast Appellate Practice Group. M.C. Sungaila has successfully briefed and argued appeals raising cutting-edge and core business issues statewide as well as nationally and internationally. As an advocate, she has helped define the scope of the duty to warn sophisticated users of product hazards, overturn multimillion dollar judgments, limit the reach of medical monitoring claims, clarify the standards for interstate enforcement of non-compete agreements, and secure important rights for women worldwide.

M.C. has received multiple awards and recognition for her work. Repeatedly named one of California's Top Women Litigators by the *Los Angeles* and *San Francisco Daily Journals*, she is also one of a select group of women to receive the Frances E. Willard Award, Alpha Phi International Fraternity's highest alumnae honor for professional achievement on a national and international level. In 2011, M.C. was the only lawyer named in *OC Metro* business magazine's annual list of the "Top 20 Women to Watch in Orange County."

**Most Successful/Favorite Rainmaking Tip:** Start from a mindset of generosity, and convey an attitude of "How can I help you?" Think about what you can do for others, not what they can do for you. If you enter a cocktail reception with a goal of "getting" a particular number of business cards, or "getting" a case, people will sense that. On the other hand, if you spend some time genuinely learning about the people you meet, and what their current needs are—legal or otherwise—you will further a relationship with them. Relationships built on trust and value result in business.

**Biggest Influence on career/best career advice:** Five mentors taught me important lessons about different aspects of legal practice. Judge Dorothy Nelson of the Ninth Circuit, for whom I externed, was the first to tell me I should be an appellate lawyer—only after I had gone through a painstaking analysis to determine where I wanted to focus my practice, and had concluded the same thing. She taught me that wise people can see things you don't see in yourself, but there is no substitute for discovering things on your own and making your own choices. She also taught me the importance of maintaining a moral compass in the law. Judge Fernandez, also on the Ninth Circuit, demonstrated quiet integrity. Judge Alicemarie Stotler, former Chief of the Central District of California, taught me the value of old-fashioned hard work, the need for precision and discipline in the law, and how to be a good colleague. Layn Phillips, one of the biggest and most consistent rainmakers at Irell & Manella, taught me how to counsel clients through high-stakes litigation and gain and retain trust. Ellis Horvitz, the founding partner of appellate firm Horvitz & Levy, showed me the appellate ropes and the gentleman's way of practice. In addition, my Mother, a long-time real estate agent, reminds me: We are all in sales, that includes lawyers.

**Percentage of time related to marketing:** Previously, as a partner at Horvitz & Levy, about 20 to 30% of my time was spent on marketing; now, as one of two partners in charge of developing the West Coast appellate practice of Snell & Wilmer, it is about 30 to 45% of my time. I divide this time up into three different areas of focus: general reputation and brand-building for my personal practice and the firm's appellate group; building new relationships; tending vintage relationships.

**Proudest accomplishment:** My favorite part of being an appellate lawyer is making a difference for my clients—often, with one case, I can change the law and set policy. I have two examples of this.

First, in handling an appeal for a client that raised the standards for admitting expert testimony in California, I noticed that this issue (still unsettled) was popping up in other

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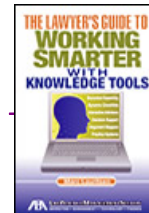
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cases around the state. We became involved as amicus in those cases, and persuaded other courts to adopt our interpretation of the admissibility standard. By the time our appeal was heard, we had other cases to cite in support of our position. Even more satisfying: a lawyer I knew at another firm was trying to argue the opposite position; she called me to say that she was stymied because at every turn, there I was in these published opinions, getting the courts to adopt a stricter standard. This experience convinced me that a proactive, strategic approach—not just a reactive one—on appellate matters can reap significant benefits.

Most recently, I filed a brief for World Organization for Human Rights USA and over 50 other human rights organizations, law professors, and law clinics in support of three families seeking to hold Mexico responsible for the decades of unsolved killings and disappearances of young women and girls in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. The case was one of my first forays into international human rights law, and my first appearance in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica. We won, and obtained a landmark human rights decision. I remember thinking that I could retire after this decision and still have had a full career.

**Knowing what you know now, if you were starting out as a lawyer today, what would you do differently?** As lawyers, even in a large firm, we are responsible for building a business within the larger business. I would have paid attention to this fact earlier as I was creating my practice. Also, men are excellent about networking for a purpose: they figure out a goal they have, they figure out who has the connections to help them achieve that goal, and they start asking for help and building support for their goal. I would have networked with a specific purpose earlier.

**Tell me one rainmaking strategy or tactic that you initially thought would work, but it failed. Why did it fail?** Very early on, I would go to a bar event and give out my card to lots of people. With so many contacts, it was hard to follow up properly and, since they had my card but I did not have theirs, I also did not have a clear way of following up with them. Now, I spend more time with a few people, get their cards (not necessarily give out mine), and make sure I have set forth a specific reason to follow up with each of them before we leave an event.

**Rainmaking that does work.** Being a strategic partner with clients, who, in turn tell other in-house counsel about you.

**Tell me one rainmaking strategy or tactic that you initially thought would fail, but it was a great success. Why was it successful?** This was not a technique I believed was a business-building tactic at all, but it turned out to build tremendous client loyalty. A client's daughter was looking for advice and suggestions on getting her first job during law school. The senior partner in my firm asked me to handle this request. I helped the daughter get her first job and every other job thereafter. She called me for advice whenever she was at a career juncture and I helped her. The client was happy I took the time to help his daughter, and my assistance—together with exceptional legal work—cemented his loyalty and support.

**What has been the greatest frustration about trying to get new business or new clients?** Patience, timing, and conflicts.

**If you were mentoring a young woman lawyer, what advice would you give regarding rainmaking?** Start thinking about it, and gain the skills to do it, early in your career. Having your own business gives you options and independence. "Increase the chatter" for other women. Men typically do this effortlessly—they talk up each other's accomplishments over lunch or out golfing, which gets them points for being a team player and also avoids slapping a "self-promoter" label on them. Women need to learn to be more comfortable "talking up" other exceptional women and their accomplishments to decision makers both inside and outside of the law firm.

**Would you say you ever had a mentor who made a genuine difference in how your career turned out? If yes, please describe.** Mentors who are also sponsors—who put their own reputation on the line and stick their necks out for you—make a difference. My sponsors—at clients, firms, and bar associations—have largely been men, with a few notable exceptions. They have advocated for me to work on their cases, to be promoted to partnership and to become a leader.

**Think about when you started out as a lawyer. Now think about the new female lawyers just starting out. What is different now compared to when you started?** New women lawyers look for women at the top of an organization as a sign that the firm is "woman-friendly," and they also seek and expect women partners to mentor them. When I first became a lawyer, this was not something we tended to look for or expect: there were even fewer women partners, and if we waited for a critical mass of women, we never would have entered the profession.

**List words that best describe you:** Strong, passionate, empathetic, competitive (in the best and purest way), resilient, focused, creative, innovative, cross-disciplinary, business-minded, capable of simultaneous attention to detail and strategic, big picture, outside-of-the-box thinking. Above all, I have integrity: I tend to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do, and my thoughts, words, and deeds align.

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