

LINDA DeBRUIN

Love of Law, Logic, and a Lab Led to IP Practice

by Paul Dailing



For some, the path to law is a straight shot from undergrad to law school to a job at a firm.

For **Kirkland & Ellis LLP** partner Linda DeBruin, it was a winding road that took her through eight years as a computer scientist and engineer at one of the world's top research laboratories.

It all started with a college admissions officer who looked at a young DeBruin's math and science test scores and simply would not let her enter her chosen major of psychology.

"He said I was going to be in the computer science program," recalls DeBruin, now 54. "He said, 'Look, you can change it after the first semester, but try it.' And I loved it. I liked the way you fit things together and built things. I liked that it was based on logic."

This same affinity for logic and applying rules to systems eventually took DeBruin into law, where she is now a partner in the intellectual property department at Kirkland's Chicago office. She focuses on patent litigation with a special emphasis on computer and communication issues.

Her eight years at AT&T—Bell Laboratories is an asset in the courtroom, she says. She relates to the expert witnesses and can extract from them the human dialogues juries understand.

But that doesn't mean she doesn't make

these highly technical cases comprehensible only when the subject matter falls within her extensive wheelhouse.

"One case that I had that was a chemistry case was actually the easiest case to think about how to explain it because I had to learn it new," she says. "Chemistry is not my thing, so it was something I had to learn from the bottom up."

The intellectual challenge, whether explaining to juries something she knows inside and out or learning something new, is part of what makes DeBruin excited about IP law.

"Maybe work isn't supposed to be fun, but it is," she says.

Rooting for Linda

Linda DeBruin was born Linda Queen in Hagerstown, Maryland.

Her father, U.S. Air Force pilot Captain Thomas Queen, died in a car accident when she was 3. She was the only child raised by her mother, Dorothy, and stepfather, Richard Clark, a maintenance supervisor for Mack Trucks.

College took her to the University of Maryland—College Park, where she intended to study psychology, but the admissions officer pressured her into computer science.

"Frankly, I had never heard of computer

science; this was 1975," she says.

DeBruin later transferred to the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, where she got her bachelor's degree with honors in 1980 and her master's degree with honors in 1981.

Then came Bell Labs.

Now part of French company Alcatel-Lucent, Bell Laboratories was the research arm of telecommunications firm AT&T when DeBruin worked there. The Naperville lab where DeBruin worked was the largest Bell Labs location, having upward of 11,000 employees as recently as 2001.

The 1980s was an exciting time to be at the lab. While DeBruin was at the company, Bell Labs introduced the first microchip with a megabyte capacity, demonstrated the first data transmission at rates higher than a gigabit per second, and had innovations in areas ranging from fiber-optics to lasers to the C++ programming language.

DeBruin designed digital switching systems for international applications, creating the technologies that allowed people to communicate better and helping set the stage for today's interconnected world.

But DeBruin was looking for more challenges.

"I had always thought about going to law school. That was always something in the back of my mind," DeBruin says.

So DeBruin went to law school—at night, while continuing her work at Bell Labs. During her first semester of law school, her duties at the lab even increased following a promotion.

"I remember one of my old bosses saying, 'I guess you weren't trying for that, were you?'" DeBruin recalls with a laugh.

She moved over to Bell Labs' legal area for her last two years.

Law school friend Alice Martin, herself a tenured professor at Northwestern University's medical school before law school, says most of the people in their program worked jobs during the day. IP law is an area where real-world experience is increasingly valued, she says.

"In general, IP lawyers are almost expected to have gone through night law school," Martin says.

Now came finding a job. DeBruin called it a "laser-focused job search." She applied to two places, both of which made her an offer.

"My last year of law school, I started to look around, and that's how I decided to come to

Kirkland,” DeBruin says.

Martin remembers the search differently. She says their group had to goad DeBruin to apply around rather than just return to Bell Labs’ legal department.

DeBruin, who had graduated *magna cum laude*, responded by almost immediately getting hired by one of the top firms in the nation.

“She said, ‘OK, I got a job,’” Martin says, laughing. “(I said,) ‘You’re supposed to check around,’ and she said, ‘Oh, I liked them, and they liked me.’”

This casual humility is typical of DeBruin, says Martin, now a partner at Barnes and Thornburg LLP.

As an example of her modesty, DeBruin did not tell the writer of this story that she was co-valedictorian of her law school class. Martin did.

“She’s firm, but she’s not a braggart. She doesn’t run around telling people how great she is,” Martin says. “I don’t think she realizes how good she is.”

Michael Stolarski, leader of Dykema’s Intellectual Property Litigation Practice Group, says DeBruin’s nature makes her a fit with clients. DeBruin and Stolarski have known each other since Stolarski was in-house counsel for Motorola and DeBruin, then an associate, represented the telecommunications giant for Kirkland.

“She’s very comfortable to deal with. Linda has a very easy-going demeanor, but yet she is tenacious in her trial work and what she does for clients,” Stolarski says. “You want to root for Linda.”

‘The Girls’ Case’

To understand what makes DeBruin so remarkable means understanding what it was like for women just a few years earlier, says Kirkland & Ellis partner William Streff, one of the practice group leaders of the firm’s 290-member Intellectual Property Department.

Streff, whose background is in mechanical engineering, says that when he started law school in 1971, his 225-person class was only 10 percent female. His 500-student undergraduate engineering program a few years earlier had had an even lower ratio of women in comparison to men.

“Those who were both engineers and in law? Very, very few,” he says. “There weren’t a lot of role models. There were very few people blazing a trail.”

There were improvements. Streff’s law school class was about one-tenth female, but by the time he graduated, the first-year students were roughly one-third female.

By the time DeBruin graduated from law school in 1989, first-year enrollment for women was above 40 percent, according to the

American Bar Association. The most recently available numbers put first-year enrollment at just over 47 percent.

However, those same numbers, accurate as of November 2010, still show a male-dominated field: 69 percent male to 31 percent female.

“I think we still have room for improvement, but I do see things moving forward,” DeBruin says. “We need to figure out how we work with those women and make sure that we’re providing an environment that’s going to help those women grow.”

One of DeBruin’s earliest experiences was one of her best. She still calls it “The Girls’ Case” with a laugh. She and two other female associates worked on a huge case for McGraw-Hill. They won big.

“We won everything on summary judgment,” she says. “It was really great to have the three women working together.”

Kirkland’s intellectual property department has a reputation for having a large number of women compared to many firms, Streff says.

The firm didn’t seek out female attorneys, he says. They just sought out the best, many of whom, like DeBruin, happened to be female.

“Going back a decade or two, for some unknown reason our department was at times 30 to 40 percent women,” Streff says. “I attribute that to no intent but the fact we were able to find, hire, and retain women in engineering and who did very well in law school.”

Explaining a Technical Field

The difference between DeBruin and many other IP attorneys is simple, Streff says. While most IP attorneys working a telecommunications case can explain what a 5ESS switch does, DeBruin actually helped design it.

People who want to become registered patent attorneys must have a certain number of science courses before they can even sit for the patent bar, Streff says. For many, Streff included, this meant engineering school, followed immediately by law school.

DeBruin’s practical experience at Bell Labs made her a valuable asset for the firm, he says, praising “her confidence, her knowledge, and her ability to explain.”

Martin agrees that practical, hands-on experience provides a unique perspective in IP law.

“We’ve actually been in the trenches with the commercial sector. I think it gives you a much broader idea what intellectual property is doing,” she says. “(Without experience), all you have is book knowledge. You don’t understand what the company needs.”

There’s a caveat: Whether a case is on a topic that DeBruin knows well, like telecommunications, or one she has to dig in

and learn, like chemistry, she is an expert by the time she hits the courtroom. The jurors aren’t.

The same technical details that win or lose cases can often confuse juries. If the first part of a case is research, the second is explaining that research to 12 laymen.

“You certainly get down to the bottom level of detail, but you have to bring it back up to explain why you should win,” DeBruin says.

DeBruin has a simple solution for beating this problem so many IP lawyers face. She asks the people in her life if her explanation makes sense.

“You work through it with other people who haven’t been living it. Sometimes, we’ll work through it with our assistants or our legal assistants or other people just to see what they take away from it,” she says. “You need that check on yourself.”

Stolarski saw that preparation come into play when DeBruin represented Motorola.

“She was extremely organized right from the get go in terms of knowing every facet of the case and understanding it,” he says.

DeBruin’s “calm demeanor” was also an asset in litigation that can sometimes get contentious.

“She was very professional in her manner with them, which I think went very well with the court,” he says.

But DeBruin is an asset even when cases don’t end up in a courtroom, her clients say. Because of her telecommunications background, DeBruin has worked not only on litigation but on special projects for Kirkland client Research In Motion, a Canadian firm responsible for the BlackBerry.

“It’s always a pleasure working with her because no matter how difficult things get, you know you’re always going to get a straight answer from her. And she always stands by what she says,” says Karima Bawa, who was general counsel for RIM during much of DeBruin’s work for the company.

A lot of the appeal of working with DeBruin is her availability and willingness “to roll up her sleeves,” Bawa says.

“We’ve worked into all hours of the day and night and into the weekend,” she recalls. “She’s just a genuinely good person. She’s just very real.”

Deer, Fun, and Creativity

Although DeBruin loves the hustle and bustle of the City That Works, home for her means splitting time between Chicago and Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, where her husband, David, has a home.

“It’s close to Milwaukee, but it’s back in the woods—we have deer and everything,” she says. “It’s nice to just go out and sit on the deck and watch the deer. It’s relaxing.”

She met her husband in 2001 in Seattle at an American Bar Association event where they were both speaking. David is also an IP lawyer in patent litigation, a partner at Michael Best & Friedrich LLP.

“We don’t tend to talk shop, but I think it helps that you understand what the other person is doing,” DeBruin says.

The pair were married six years ago. It was a second marriage for both. DeBruin is now stepmother to four children, three of whom are grown.

One term that comes up again and again when people talk about Linda DeBruin is “creative.” Bawa used the word to describe DeBruin’s approach to problem-solving on IP cases. Martin was describing DeBruin in her personal life.

“Her style is to try to find the creative way forward,” Bawa says. “She’s actually quite resourceful in trying to find a resolution that is outside of a courtroom setting.”

“She’s a very loyal person to her friends; she’s very creative,” Martin says. “She’s not afraid to try new ways of doing things.”

The same words keep coming back when the people who know her describe DeBruin—dedicated (to friends or clients), organized (in arranging cases or social gatherings), and calm (in the face of any personal or professional adversity).

But for DeBruin, both her personal and professional lives keep coming back to one word: fun.

“I remember once saying to one of my supervisors in the legal department at Bell Labs that I wouldn’t want to have a career unless it was something that was fun. This has certainly been something I’ve enjoyed and something that has kept me interested,” she says.

Asked to consider her winding road to law, to Chicago, and to sitting on that deck in Wauwatosa watching deer with her husband, DeBruin pauses briefly.

“I really can’t think of what I would do different,” she says. ■