

Outstanding Women: Laura Coruzzi

By **Erik Larson**, erik.larson@portfoliomedia.com

Tuesday, April 03, 2007 --- When Dr. Laura A. Coruzzi decided to change her focus from the lab to the law, she gambled that she wouldn't have to sacrifice her love for science to follow her dream. More than 20 years later, her prediction has held true.

Coruzzi has been a partner at Jones Day LLP's New York office since 2003. An IP practice leader and chair of the firm's life sciences group, she works with biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, medical devices and diagnostics every day, tapping a proficiency in science that developed when she was in junior high school.

After earning three biology degrees, Coruzzi's interest in law led her to spend more than two decades at Pennie & Edmonds LLP, where she was one of the first members of the firm's biotechnology group. It was founded by S. Leslie Misrock, known as the "father of biotechnology patent law."

The jump to Pennie & Edmonds wasn't a flippant move. She eased off her solid career path in science by following advice from her relatives that she remembers years later: If you've got fire in your belly to do law then you have to do it or you may regret it.

"I was convinced that I wouldn't be losing science by pursuing law," Coruzzi said, adding that her interest in biotech law was cemented when the Supreme Court said living things are patentable, gene splicing was invented and Genentech Inc. went public.

"When the industry was in its early stages, business journals didn't know what to make of it. But I knew the technology would only go forward—not backward. It was an opportunity to grow with the industry," Coruzzi said.

Coruzzi saw the potential for the technology, but felt that tackling it from a legal perspective would provide more immediate benefits than waiting for the bulk of labs to catch up to what she'd been working on.

"Moving into the industry at that time wasn't an attractive thing to me, because the original work was done in bacterial systems and I was working on higher systems—using cells with nuclei as a systematic approach to making pharmaceuticals. I knew it would take a while for the technology to catch up," Coruzzi said.

The balancing act between law and science began in Manhattan's Lower

East Side, where Coruzzi was born to immigrant Italian parents. Her uncle became a lawyer and subsequently the pride and joy of family. He always wanted Coruzzi to go into law and many of her teachers encouraged her to do the same.

“I guess I argued a lot. And I wrote well and debated well. But I thought science was more my forte. My family didn’t realize that scientists aren’t really lab rats,” Coruzzi said.

She was more interested in science, making the science honors program in junior high school and attending a specialized science high school. But Coruzzi didn’t see her desire to study science as out of sync with her family’s respect for the law.

“To be a successful scientist you need a lot of the same skills that lawyers need to compete for grants, manage money, guide people and defend work,” Coruzzi said. “Successful scientists have similar skill sets.”

Staying on a science track, Coruzzi earned her undergraduate degree, master’s degree and Ph.D. in biology from Fordham University.

Coruzzi did a postdoctoral in the microbiology department of Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York. Among other things, she studied fundamental protein complexes called nuclear pores.

But just as Coruzzi and her colleagues began delving into whether or not such pores were involved in processing messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA), she finished her postdoctoral and labs began struggling.

“Reagan was elected and grant money started drying up. Labs were downsizing. It was pretty bleak. I thought, ‘This is a terrible way to get started. How am I going to run my own lab? Where am I going to be when I’m 55?’” Coruzzi said.

Coruzzi had been encouraged to explore new ideas in the academic world and felt comfortable working on her own.

“Joining a company and working on exactly what they told me to work on wasn’t my cup of tea. Even though I wasn’t sure of the future of academic science, it allowed me to pick what I wanted to work on,” Coruzzi said.

“I feel I’ve done a lot more as a lawyer in this area than I ever could have accomplished as a scientist working behind the bench on a single project,” Coruzzi said.

Coruzzi’s mother wasn’t excited about her daughter studying law. Coruzzi’s aunt, a New York scientist who was doing a postdoctoral at Rockefeller, put Coruzzi in touch with one of her advisors to encourage her to continue on her path toward the lab.

“She thought her advisor would talk me out of the ‘crazy’ idea of law, but after spending an hour with him going over research and the opportunity I saw with law, he said he would do exactly what I was doing if he were in my position,” Coruzzi said.

An uncle—her mother’s twin brother—was a driving force and acted as one of her advisors. He had her list out the pros and cons of pursuing law, which helped her realize that her prospects could be amazing if she joined a new industry and got an early start.

Coruzzi thought her age would be a setback and that starting law school in her late 20s would be challenging. But her uncle told her, “Four years from now you’ll be four years older no matter what.”

Another lawyer said to look up Pennie & Edmonds in 1981, because the head of the firm was looking to grow a biotechnology group. She attended four years of night school and joined the firm’s law clerk program along with several other budding attorneys. The firm’s attitude, according to Coruzzi, was that it was easier to make a lawyer out of a scientist than to make a lawyer learn science.

“The exciting thing about it was that even though the patent laws are as old as this country, it hadn’t been applied to this new technology that the founding fathers never would have dreamed of,” Coruzzi said.

“We knew we were writing these kinds of patents for the first time, determining if it was patentable, how to claim, how to enforce it, it was exciting.”

Coruzzi said it was a very rich environment to be in because many of her new colleagues had 30 years of experience and had joined the firm’s pharmaceutical and organic chemistry groups when they were equally new.

She was able to learn from their experiences, but for Coruzzi, the biggest challenge was dealing with a surprise from the pharmaceutical industry—It wasn’t yet impressed with biotechnology or its potential.

“There was sort of a rift. The synthetic organic chemists who liked to mix molecules and sell them in a bottle said antibodies would never be drugs—not on their watch,” Coruzzi said.

She said the entrenched industry was against fostering biologics as new drugs. They didn’t understand the technology or they were concerned about FDA approval and the costs of development and manufacturing—not to mention the fact that proteins aren’t easy to store, making deliveries to the Third World difficult.

“I learned it wasn’t all about the science. Those days are over, but it took longer than I would have anticipated,” Coruzzi said.

“From a sociological point of view, the patent bar was dominated by men, but the biotech industry brought in a lot of women into the practice of patent law—probably for the first time,” Coruzzi said. “Despite that it was still more inviting than life in a lab. There was more potential for women to succeed in law than in science.”

The group worked on cloned genes, antivirals, AIDS medicine, antibody patents for drugs that worked against different kinds of cancers and a lot of virology patents for vaccines for flu and related viruses, Coruzzi said.

“One portfolio involved patents for genetically engineering viruses so mutations wouldn’t be left to chance. They designed their own mutations and used them to design vaccine strains,” Coruzzi said.

The whole group of about 100 lawyers eventually moved to Jones Day in a bid to compete with growing IP groups at general practice firms, solidify its global reach and improve its legal strategy overseas.

“We saw that general practice firms were really moving into the IP world and we decided to pick a firm rather than be picked apart,” Coruzzi said.

Sticking together was also important because Pennie & Edmonds was like a family, she said.

“We spent 20 years building up that group and we didn’t want to lose what we had. We have a cadre of Ph.D.’s and master’s degrees with lawyers who cover the gamut of science from genes to drugs, chemists, etc. We didn’t want to break apart,” Coruzzi said.

Her husband, NYU School of Medicine professor Bob Schneider, does research on viruses and translational medicine for breast cancer. They met in a lab at Mt. Sinai, but she wouldn’t go out with him while they were working together. They were married in 1986.

Coruzzi made partner at the firm in 1989 and had her daughter, Eva, in 1991. A young partner, she convinced herself that being pregnant was somehow problematic, but later realized the fear was just in her own “screwed up head.”

“I remember having old fashioned ideas about those things due to my family. I was asked to speak at Princeton and I said ‘You realize I’m very pregnant!’ because I didn’t think I should be on stage in that condition,” Coruzzi said.

“They said, ‘Are you kidding? What a great role model!’ That was the perception. I thought it was unprofessional, but people around me thought it was no big deal.”

After Eva arrived and she spent six weeks at home, Coruzzi was able to keep her focus on work with help from her mother.

“My mom was around, so I had a babysitter. It was a good place to be. It would have been harder without my mom,” Coruzzi said.