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BOTH SIDES NOW

WHEN DANA SULLIVAN (PLAINTIFF) AND COURTNEY ANGELI (DEFENSE) JOIN FORCES, WATCH OUT



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Sullivan for the PLAINTIFF, Angeli for the DEFENSE

How two employment
attorneys from across
the aisle joined forces

BY NANCY ROMMELMANN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRAIG MITCHELLDYER

Courtney Angeli

Partner, Buchanan Angeli Altschul
& Sullivan; Portland

Employment Litigation: Plaintiff;
Employment Litigation: Defense

Super Lawyers: 2006–2016;
Top 50: 2011–2014, 2016;
Top 25 Women: 2007–2016

Dana L. Sullivan

Partner, Buchanan Angeli Altschul
& Sullivan; Portland

Employment Litigation: Plaintiff

Super Lawyers: 2007–2016;
Top 50: 2010, 2012–2016;
Top 25 Women: 2009–2016

As a student at New York University School of Law, Dana L. Sullivan never took an employment law class. “I had no interest in it,” she says.

By her second year at the University of Michigan, after taking a class taught by feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon that examined early case law in sex discrimination, Courtney Angeli knew the field was for her. “I took every [employment] law-related class my school offered: individual employee rights and responsibilities, labor law and employment discrimination,” she says.

A clerkship with a federal judge convinced Sullivan that an employment-law plaintiff practice had, she says, “a lot of the same human-interest stories and righteous cases as legal aid and indigent defense”—her initial focus. By 1997, she was in Portland, practicing employment law exclusively.

Meanwhile, Angeli was also in Portland, working for a firm “on some timber contract case that I just hated,” she says. She soon left for Stoel Rives, which had a designated employment law group.

That’s when the two attorneys began seeing each other across the aisle: Sullivan for the plaintiff, Angeli for the defense.

Each was young and married. Each was adept at handling, in Angeli’s words, “the panic calls that are a hallmark of both sides of the employment situation.”

And each admired the other. “When you’re a defense lawyer, you have a certain stereotype of plaintiff’s lawyers sort of taking anything,” Angeli says. “Dana always had good cases; she was clearly more selective. And her written product was excellent.”

“Courtney was tenacious but reasonable—a refreshing combination,” says Sullivan.

Eventually, they joined forces. In 2008, the two helped found Buchanan Angeli Altschul & Sullivan in Portland. While often on opposite sides of the aisle, they’re now in the same hallway.

None of it would’ve happened if Angeli hadn’t gotten bored.

“After doing 15 years of exclusively defense work, I was feeling like, ‘I need a change of pace,’” she says. “I liked Dana’s practice. I liked the way Dana interacted with other people. ... But I was really scared to do it because I didn’t know how to do it,

so I tagged along with Dana on some cases. Still do. ‘What would you do with this?’ That’s very much what we do as a firm, with all of our cases. We’re always running them by each other.”

Sullivan concurs. “I’ve had little exposure to how businesses work—what their goals are, what their fears are,” she says. “[Now] I can pop into Courtney’s office and say, ‘Here’s what I’m struggling with in this case: what do you think?’ She’ll have eight ideas—that I never would have dreamed of—of making the employer terribly uncomfortable, because she knows what makes *her* terribly uncomfortable.”

The firm is busy, turning down three cases a day, says Sullivan. This, after a fairly intensive screening process by staff that lets the attorneys know whether the case is worth the investment of time, and whether there’s a possible conflict of interest, which, Sullivan says, “we obviously need to be really stringent about avoiding.”

Angeli mixes in some plaintiff’s work with her defense practice, as does co-founder Andrew Altschul. Paul Buchanan does about 95 percent defense work and 5 percent plaintiff’s work. Sullivan is the only partner solely for the plaintiff.

The partnership of plaintiff/defense gets noticed. In November 2012, the Portland Trail Blazers hired Angeli as lead outside counsel, and among the reasons, says Ben Lauritsen, senior vice president of legal and corporate affairs for the NBA franchise, was the makeup of the firm. Each partner, Lauritsen says, had big-firm experience, but they had “set up a practice that had the nimbleness of a small operation.” He also felt that Angeli was the person “we would want to be ‘the face’ if we did end up in some ugly court dispute.”

Which has not happened. In those three years, the organization and its related entertainment business, made up of 220 full-time and upwards of 1,000 part-time employees, have never gone to trial. Angeli, knowing how to play both ends of the court, has been a big part of this.

Says Lauritsen: “Being able to call Courtney and say, ‘This is what the employee is alleging. Would you take this case if the employee called you?’ Usually she’s like, ‘No, there’s no case; don’t be worried about it.’ If Courtney would say, ‘We’d take this case and kick your ass with it,’ we’d settle quickly.”

THE CAMARADERIE AND SNAP BETWEEN

Angeli and Sullivan is on display one morning at the firm’s conference table as they talk about the day’s headlines—including the NFL, after some creative accounting, owing the players union more than \$100 million.

“How shocking to hear that about the NFL!” Angeli says, with a look of mock horror.

“They’re generally so above board,” adds Sullivan.

If the attorneys started out adversarial, they now finish each other’s sentences.

“We’ve tried several cases together,” they say at the same time.

“It’s an emotionally charged experience to go through a trial. It’s just a heckuva lot more fun doing it with someone else,” says Angeli. “We’re very different lawyers but working on a trial, we just sort of divide it up and do it.”

“From an entertainment-value standpoint,” says Sullivan, “if they don’t like my shtick, they’ll like Courtney’s shtick. We have complementary styles.”

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“Women who have gotten where they are because they operate in ways that are stereotypically male are still dinged for that.”
—COURTNEY ANGELI



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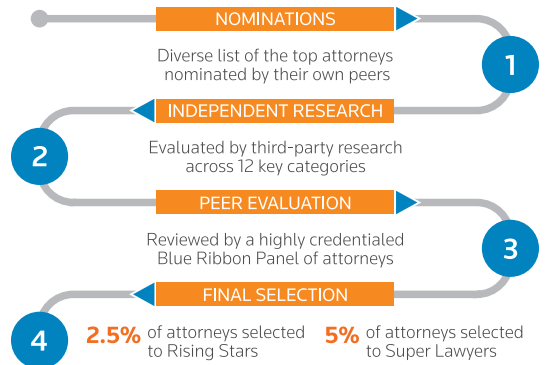
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