



Profile: Anna Dubrovsky

Russian immigrant runs her own firm, raises two children and takes on insurance companies

By **STEPHEN ELLISON**

Growing up half way around the world, during a time when her countrymen viewed America as the sworn enemy, Anna Dubrovsky never could have imagined doing what she does today: standing up in a court of law and persuading U.S. citizens to punish *their* countrymen – those from big corporations and insurance companies – for wrongdoing.

But the native of Russia is doing just that – and, much to her pleasant surprise, succeeding. “I’m always amazed that I’m able to do this – this is a great country,” said Dubrovsky, a sole practitioner based in San Francisco. “Here I am with this accent, an immigrant, a woman. The fact that I can go to trial and stand in front of 12 people, and they will listen to me – the fact that I’m allowed to do that – is amazing to me. It’s a huge honor to be able to represent a client – and it’s a huge responsibility. But it feels good.”

Considering what she’s had to endure to arrive at that feeling, it’s no wonder Dubrovsky may have surprised herself a little. “She’s a tough chickie – stunningly smart and savvy,” explained Eileen Simon, a sole practitioner based in San Jose who met Dubrovsky through Consumer Attorneys of California.

Born and raised in Moscow, Dubrovsky was inspired through books to enroll in law school at Lomonosov Moscow State University in the mid-1980’s, a time when Russia was still under the old communist regime. Litigation law was non-existent there; criminal law and family law were practiced, but there were no disputes between businesses because everything was government-owned, Dubrovsky said.



Dubrovsky

However, it also was a time of great transformation in that part of the world. “The structure of society was changing, and so the need for law was evolving,” Dubrovsky recalled. “The question was which legal system should we adopt – that was interesting and exciting to me. I worked a little bit in the legal department of a factory, and I knew that I wanted to pursue law when I came to the U.S.”

Indeed, Dubrovsky’s family immigrated to America in 1990, settling first in New Jersey, and she wasted little time re-launching that pursuit. She attended New York University and earned her paralegal certificate. The family then moved to San Francisco, where Dubrovsky met her husband, married him and started her own family before continuing her law education. Her firstborn – a daughter – was just four weeks old when Dubrovsky started law school at University of San Francisco.

“The LSAT was the first standardized test I’d ever taken,” Dubrovsky said. “It was the most difficult and stressful test I’ve ever had to take – even harder than the bar exam.

“And then law school was very challenging,” she continued. “First of all, there’s no way of knowing how you’re doing – during that first year, they don’t post grades or progress reports. So I didn’t know whether I was passing or not. I probably tried so much harder and was so focused because of that. I don’t think I’ve ever been so focused in my life.”

Paying her dues

Upon wrapping up her second stint of law school, Dubrovsky again gave very little thought, if any, to becoming a litigator. This time, however, it wasn’t for a lack of opportunity. Demand for lawyers in the private sector had reached stratospheric levels – the dot-coms and their mounds of venture capital cash had come calling, and most law students were salivating. “When I was in law school, I had no desire to do plaintiff law,” Dubrovsky said. “Like everyone else, I wanted to get into IP (intellectual property).”

But after graduation, Dubrovsky, being a family woman, was not in a position to bide her time and wait for her dream job. She had a mortgage, bills to pay and a daughter to raise. So when an insurance defense firm in Menlo Park extended an offer, she took it. “I did that for about one-and-a-half years,” she recalled. “It was a very good experience. It taught me litigation. I wouldn’t want to do that now, but it is a very good way to learn.”

Then came the low point in her career: a move to a San Francisco defense firm, working in product liability defense for an automaker. Everything about that job made Dubrovsky cringe – the work, her supervising partner, her client. “I hated every single minute of it,” she said without pause. “I was very unhappy.”

Soon, though, her misery would end, thanks to a firm that had employed her as a clerk while she attended USF law school: Choulos, Choulos & Wyle of San Francisco. Partners George Choulos and Claude Wyle, whom she considered good friends, rescued Dubrovsky from an insurance defense career and made her a contract associate. “They asked me, ‘While you’re looking for a job, do you want to



do some contract work for us?’ So I started there, trying to figure out what I wanted to do,” Dubrovsky said. “It was kind of interesting. I started bringing in business – you know, I had a lot of exposure in the Russian community, and I started bringing in a lot of Russian clients. I started liking it.”

“I was eager to do trials – that was my ultimate goal, to get into the courtroom,” she continued. “I was going to do anything I could do to get in there.” To learn trial skills from experienced attorneys outside Choulos, she joined trial lawyer associations and “used every opportunity to go to seminars and conventions. I always want to know about cutting edge trial techniques.”

What began as temporary contract work turned into a long-term gig at Choulos. Ten years and dozens of cases later, she amicably parted ways with Choulos and Wyle and started the Anna Dubrovsky Law Group in San Francisco. “Sometimes business-wise, it doesn’t make sense to keep doing something like that [working for others]. I felt it was time for me to move forward,” Dubrovsky said about her decision to go solo. “By the time I left, I didn’t really need help anymore. And financially, I was in a good position to do it. It was just logical.”

Prepped for trial

While Dubrovsky has tried many cases to favorable verdict over the years, there are a couple that have stuck with her for their complexity, the challenge they posed and the rewarding feeling they ultimately produced for her. She believes much of her courtroom success can be attributed to her ability to use her so-called detriments to her advantage. Her colleagues feel there are other natural skills at work. “She’s very personable and yet very aggressive – that’s a good combination to have,” Simon said. “Plus she’s persistent as hell – she just does not give up.”

One of those memorable cases came in the summer of 2009 and got Dubrovsky a nomination for Trial Lawyer of the Year by CAOC. Her client was a Russian

immigrant who injured his back in a side-swipe accident in San Francisco. An arbitrator set the award at \$67,000, but Allstate rejected it and offered \$17,000. A trial was inevitable. “We told the defense we were willing to take \$65,000, and they refused again,” Dubrovsky said.

The night before the trial was to start, the defense came back with an offer of \$50,000, but by that time it was too late. Dubrovsky tried the case and won a \$774,000 verdict. “It was amazing,” she said. “My client, when the jury came back and announced the verdict, he couldn’t believe it. I tried to tell him, and he didn’t understand. I had to write the amount down, so he could understand how much it was.

“And when my paralegal called the office to give them the news – George and Claude were there waiting – they said, ‘No that can’t be right – you mean \$74,000, right?’ It was a great feeling.”

Another noteworthy case was one that several attorneys wouldn’t take. It involved a motorcycle and a gasoline truck colliding on the incline of a two-way road in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Dubrovsky’s client, the motorcycle rider, ended up in Stanford Hospital in critical condition. According to the police report, which had witness accounts, the motorcyclist clipped the rear wheel of the big-rig when he crossed the double-yellow line trying to pass the biker in front of him.

The motorcyclist, whose insurance had expired, claimed it was the truck’s rear wheel that crossed over into his lane.

So, with a police report and witnesses 100 percent against her client, what possessed Dubrovsky to take the case? “I knew in my heart that my client was telling the truth,” she said. “The question was how can I prove it?”

First, she was able to reinstate his insurance policy. Then she did as much discovery as possible on the trucking company, which turned out to be the winning strategy. “I found out trucking companies lie – about everything.”

Dubrovsky found that the truck had been speeding, which the driver lied about

to the police. Then, as she dug deeper, she found that the trucking company falsified its personnel record of the driver: they said he was given a test that he wasn’t given. Finally, she found that the driver had a second driving job and thus had exceeded the maximum number of weekly hours allowed behind the wheel.

Dubrovsky also was able to discredit the two witness accounts, but it was her ability to shift the focus onto the trucking company that led to her victory. “They lied, they falsified documents – by the time the trial was winding down, the jury hated the trucking company, they were really furious with them,” she recalled.

The verdict came back at \$4.7 million (gross), a very large verdict for San Mateo County, and earned her a nomination as San Francisco Trial Lawyer of the Year for 2011.

Just doing it

Today, Dubrovsky heads a thriving firm and continues to raise two daughters, one 16, the other six. She gives her husband a lot of credit for allowing her the time to build a successful practice. “He played a big role in my becoming a lawyer. He always has been supportive of me and helped me to pursue my dreams. He is the one who took care of the children when I was in trial for four weeks in San Mateo, living in a hotel and working 20 hours a day for six weeks straight.”

With all the pressures of a practice, Dubrovsky still finds time to travel the world with her family with recent trips to Asia, Europe and South America, and she does what she can for professional organizations. “I try to find a balance, you know,” she said. “I’d like to do more – I’m involved with the SFTLA (San Francisco Trial Lawyers Association) – but I’m not in a position to do much more right now with the children.”

What she can do now is pass on some of the wisdom of a seasoned trial attorney. Her philosophy is rather simple but quite effective – for any type of lawyer: hard



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work and learn by doing. “Ten years ago when I first started, I didn’t even care if I got paid – I just wanted to get into the courtroom,” Dubrovsky said. “It’s the only way you can learn. No amount of classes or seminars is going to prepare you for a

trial. Standing in front of a jury and doing it is the best way to train for it.

“It can be so difficult and frustrating at times,” she added, “but once you’re prepared, and you’re standing there doing your job, it can also be so rewarding.”

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