



# Profile: Elise Sanguinetti

*Knowing the importance of what she is doing gets the future president of CAOC through long days and nights*

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Optimism may not draw a direct route to success in law, but it certainly can serve as a launching point. Just ask Elise Sanguinetti, whose glass-half-full approach has helped her ascension into the plaintiffs' law elite in Northern California.

Sanguinetti, a partner with Khorrami Boucher Sumner Sanguinetti of Oakland, has overcome numerous challenges – including the unenviable woman-in-a-man's-world plight – and faced adversaries large and small over her 16-year career. Along the way, her positive outlook has guided her, and now she is poised to become a leader among her plaintiffs' law peers.

"The draw was helping people; I really wanted to do something, be a voice for somebody who otherwise wouldn't have one," Sanguinetti said. "And I wanted to be a very effective voice for them, which I think has really driven me to get more involved in plaintiffs' lawyer organizations."

"It's a hugely important part of what I do," she continued. "I can make a big difference for my clients through my practice and make an even larger difference both in California and nationally for other people's clients. It's really a passion for me."

Indeed, Sanguinetti has taken the initial steps and positioned herself to make such an impact in California. She has been on the board of governors for Consumer Attorneys of California since 2008 and, if all goes as planned, is two years from being elected president of that organization. She's also climbing the ladder nationally as an executive committee member of the American Association of Justice and could be the president of that organization in five years, she estimates.



Sanguinetti

Washington, D.C.," she said. "It's really exciting and cool. I love it. It's a great mixture for me because I'm a political junkie. Protecting our access to justice is really what it is, and so when I can go and sit down with a U.S. senator and talk about why it's important to keep the courthouse doors open and talk about how forced arbitration is completely unfair – when I can go and do those things, I know I can make an even larger impact."

In the meantime, Sanguinetti continues to thrive in the personal injury arena, working mainly wrongful death and catastrophic injury cases. Even though these cases do not often make it to the trial stage, the resolutions often come in the eleventh hour, which means she must approach every case as if it's going to trial.

"I have had multiple cases that have come to the first day of trial and then settled," she recalled. "I can think of six or seven that were completely ready for trial and settled on the first day."

"It's always been my philosophy that if I'm willing to take a case, I'm willing to take it to trial," she continued. "So I'm always analyzing it, making sure it's beneficial to the client to go to trial because

"That is a huge focus for me – making as big of an impact as I can for my single clients and then making sure that we continue to have a strong voice in Sacramento and

I don't want them involved in litigation if, in the end, I'm not willing to take it to trial or they're not willing to take it to trial."

## Always 'ready to go'

The task of preparation is key. Sanguinetti feels she may be in the minority as a plaintiffs' lawyer who actually doesn't mind all the writing and paperwork involved in getting ready for a trial. In fact, she believes it is a very significant part of her job. That ethos likely was branded on her during law school while she clerked for two judges in Contra Costa County – Judge Barbara Ann Zúñiga, who is still on the county bench, and Justice Ignazio J. Ruvolo, of the county's appellate section.

"I was lucky enough to be able to review the law and motion work and the trial briefs and all the papers that go along with a trial," Sanguinetti said. "There's so much that happens besides the amount of depositions you do – expert depositions and factual witness depositions – but most of it is preparing paperwork such as pleadings to get the court ready to have your case heard."

"So, again, even if I believe the defendants are ready to settle, I'm ready to go," she continued. "There's no part of me that is not ready to go to trial that day, and I've prepared my clients for that and take it very seriously."

## Female role models

Born in Phoenix, Sanguinetti moved with her family to Walnut Creek when she was three. She grew up with five older siblings – the three youngest of which were girls – and a very strong, hardworking mother, she said, so she had plenty of female role models. At University of San Francisco School of Law, her class was more than half female, so she hadn't anticipated or acknowledged the challenges



of being a woman in a profession dominated by men until she started working in the field.

The most common scenario as she describes it has been walking into a conference room for a deposition and immediately being asked if she is the court reporter. That happened multiple times early in her career, she said, and still does on occasion. But she also described some very different scenarios that indicate a changing landscape in the profession. “Most recently, I had a case that settled where they had seven lawyers on the defense side, and when I went to a deposition of a doctor, every lawyer in the room was a woman,” Sanguinetti said. “That was really refreshing and nice and different. And it’s nice to see how the field is changing and more women stay and become trial lawyers, both on the defense and plaintiff side.”

### Great communicator

Sanguinetti said she can remember wanting to be a lawyer since she was in kindergarten, but she couldn’t recall specifically what influenced that desire, except possibly a friend whose father was a lawyer. She never had experiences with the law like those of her colleagues, many of whom are second- and third-generation lawyers. In college, she studied political science and took a keen interest in the lawyerly backgrounds of the politicians of the time. “I felt that it was so important because they were the best communicators,” she explained.

The attraction to plaintiff’s law did not come until law school, after Sanguinetti clerked for the two judges and worked for the late Donald Galine, her first mentor. In her three years with Galine, she not only learned the importance of being an effective advocate for plaintiffs, but she also began to understand the significance of connecting with the rest of the plaintiff’s law community.

“As soon as I started working for Don, I was hooked,” she said. “He was the vice president for CAOC at the time, and I learned a lot about the organization,

about what plaintiffs’ lawyers did, and I was just drawn to it right away.”

Sanguinetti wasted little time getting her feet wet. Soon after passing the bar, she found herself assisting in a wrongful death trial against Ford Motor Co. involving three of six family members killed in a rollover accident. She called it a long, hard-fought trial – it lasted about three months – and she said it was an amazing experience.

“We ended up losing, which taught me a lot – and right off the bat – about how difficult this job is sometimes,” she said. “It taught me about loss and helping our clients through loss when it does happen.

“Then we appealed the decision – that was first appellate brief I ever worked on – and we ended up getting the case overturned,” she continued. “After many years, we ended up getting the case resolved after it was ordered back to trial. So that was a really big learning process early on for me – about how justice can be delayed, but it’s still worth the fight.”

These days, on the few occasions when a case reaches the trial stage, Sanguinetti said she thrives on being an empathetic storyteller, a communicator of exactly what has happened and how and why her client has been wronged. She believes establishing a strong connection with jurors is critical because if the jury doesn’t appreciate the importance of the case to the plaintiff and how the situation has changed the plaintiff’s life, then those 12 strangers in the jury box likely won’t want to help with liability and damages.

“I believe that comes with preparation – making sure you know the story, being able to comprehend it and express it,” Sanguinetti explained. “But also being able to find ways to communicate it effectively to a jury, make it real for them.”

### Work the network

During her infrequent stretches of leisure time, Sanguinetti said she enjoys spending time with her husband and

extended family residing in Northern California. She also loves to travel, and last year, she and her husband took their first non-work-related vacation in several years: a trip to Italy to celebrate their 15th wedding anniversary. “It was so fantastic,” she said. “I forgot what it felt like to not be connected.”

But of course, being connected is at the very foundation of her career. When asked what advice she had to offer young or aspiring plaintiffs’ lawyers, she pointed to the expansive community of legal professionals that would be at their disposal. “I would tell them they should never feel like they’re alone,” she said. “There’s a large group of lawyers out there that you can rely on for help, for information, to teach you how to be a better lawyer. Rely on those people and get involved because it’s the best way to network and meet amazing, inspiring people that are just an email, text or phone call away. I’ve never seen people share info and help each other the way we do. That’s because we know what we’re doing is bigger than one client.”

That potential reach – and its impending influence on society – is what keeps Sanguinetti plugging away.

“My husband will always say he doesn’t understand my motivation for why I want to work as hard as I work,” Sanguinetti said. “But I always come back to not only are my clients relying on me, but I feel like what I’m doing is making an even bigger difference. It motivates you on those nights when you’re up until two in the morning fighting a summary judgment motion or getting an appellate brief ready to go or preparing for trial. Whatever it is, you know what you’re doing is critically important – the most important thing – to the people you’re representing, and it can have an even larger impact beyond them.”

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