



# Profile: Karine Bohbot and Elizabeth Riles

*It's all about symmetry for this pair of employment lawyers at the top of their game*

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

It's hard to say where Karine Bohbot and Elizabeth Riles would be today if they hadn't found each other and formed one of the more formidable employment law firms in Northern California.

What's easy to see is that the principals of Bohbot & Riles PC, based in Oakland, undoubtedly would have been just as successful as individual lawyers as they have been as a team. But something about the partnership makes so much more sense.

Bohbot is a shrewd trial lawyer, always ready to protect people stuck in a situation where they are unable to stand up for themselves. She holds back very little at trial but always remains in control. Riles does much of the behind-the-scenes work, helping put the pieces of a case together and establishing a connection with clients. The two came from very different backgrounds but discovered quickly that they had very similar visions when it came to the law.

"For me, I always had this need to try to stand up and defend those who are in situations where they can't defend themselves, and for whatever reason, it got into the employment arena, beyond the basic civil rights stuff," Bohbot said. "I think because we just got this general feel that we could help them. I've always said I would much rather work at Starbucks than deal with this stuff – with employers discriminating and retaliating against their workers and taking advantage of those who don't know any better. ... Of course, we all know I'll never get (to Starbucks) because these companies are always going to be around."

## It started with a summer job

Riles got a taste of employment law before she even made it to law school, working summers at a Berkeley firm as a



Elizabeth Riles and Karine Bohbot

teenager. The firm specialized in employment discrimination.

"I don't think I ever understood or would have understood how intense or emotional losing a job was until I worked there," Riles explained. "I talked with people on the phone every day who felt like they had given their life and all their time and energy to a job and had it snatched away because of their gender or race or some other thing they couldn't change about themselves. ... That's what made me interested in that work. And I also was able to see that lawyers could do that sort of work and make a good living at it and support their families."

With their combined experience and skills, Bohbot and Riles quickly established themselves in the employment arena, making companies pay for unlawful practices in the workplace. The firm recently obtained a number of six- and seven-figure verdicts for victims of discrimination, retaliation, harassment, lost wages and hostile work environments.

In one case, Bohbot & Riles represented a female truck driver who was sexually harassed by her trainer. The company, CRST Van Expedited, failed to address the worker's complaints, and the firm got a jury verdict of \$1.3 million, including punitive damages.

In another case, the firm represented a pair of Woodfin Suites employees who were subjected to disability discrimination and retaliation by a new supervisor, who had taken quick and unreasonable steps to terminate the workers with 12 and 14 years, respectively, with the company. Bohbot & Riles obtained a \$1.2 million jury verdict on behalf of its clients.

Finally, the firm recently represented the founder and former CEO of a Bay Area charter school. The client discovered the school's board of directors was engaging in illegal activities, and when she complained, she was ultimately terminated. After a more than two-month trial, Bohbot & Riles got a jury verdict of \$545,000 plus a confidential settlement of punitive damages after the jury found the board and its president acted with malice when firing the woman.

Riles and Bohbot have received a number of accolades for their work over the years. Both were honored with the Commendation for Trial Advocacy from the City of Lancaster in the CRST International case in 2011, and both were named finalists for Consumer Attorneys of California Street Fighter of the Year award in 2012.

## Different paths

Born in Berkeley and raised in Oakland, Riles said for as long as she can remember, she had wanted to become a lawyer. As many children do, the young Riles had a list of several professions she aspired to, and lawyer was always near the top of that list.

"My mom was a teacher, and I would stay up late and grade papers with her so I could watch 'LA Law' when I was a kid," Riles said. "My mom always made me go to summer school, which I hated. So when I was 15, I begged her not to make me go to summer school, and she said I had to get a job. So I did; I got a job at a law firm



in Berkeley ... and basically worked there every summer through my first summer after law school.”

Bohbot, a native of Paris, France, moved to the United States when she was 10. When she was still young and learning the language and the culture, she remembers watching the Ku Klux Klan march through her Jewish neighborhood, and there being a protest on whether or not it should be considered free speech. “For me, being a Jew and having family die in the Holocaust, I still somehow found inside of myself that this is a First Amendment right,” Bohbot said. “We all have a right to speak; you don’t have to listen. It was stuck in my heart: We don’t have the right to stop people from speaking. ... Ever since that day, I decided I was going to be a civil rights lawyer or do something to protect people’s rights. From there, I knew my path and started taking the appropriate courses to get to law school.”

### Life is better at a small firm

Bohbot earned a bachelor’s degree from UC Santa Barbara and went on to attend UC Hastings College of the Law. There, she came to the realization that civil rights law was going to be her career objective and aiming for a job at a large firm was not going to suit her.

“I knew I couldn’t do it; I don’t take orders very well, and I don’t like being told what to do too much,” she said. “I didn’t want to do contract work, didn’t want to do insurance work, none of that interested me. I wanted to be in trial and defend the rights of individuals in whatever capacity that might be.”

Bohbot started at a boutique firm, a two-attorney practice that did employment law and immigration. She initially arrived as a paralegal, just after graduating from law school and before passing the bar. After she was admitted to the bar, the firm offered her a full-time position, she said. “So I was their first associate,” Bohbot recalled. “It paid a pittance. I worked there a couple of years, and then Elizabeth arrived.”

Riles, who earned a bachelor’s degree in human biology from Stanford

University before attending Boalt Hall School of Law at UC Berkeley, took a different career route in the beginning. During her second year of law school, she followed a typical path of interviewing with big firms and landed a summer associate job at a general litigation firm in San Francisco. She continued with that firm right out of law school then landed at Brobeck, Phleger & Harrison, LLP in the insurance coverage department.

“I worked for Brobeck for almost two years, but I did not really enjoy that work,” Riles said. “You’re supposed to, as an attorney, diligently represent your client, and I found it very difficult to have a lot of feeling and care for these billion-dollar companies I was representing. Also, the lifestyle at the firm was not one I felt I wanted to have. The money was good, but if you never have the time to spend it or enjoy it, I don’t understand the point.”

### Chance meeting, binding partnership

After about two years, Riles decided she needed to leave Brobeck, and she took a large pay cut to go work for Kerosky & Bradley, LLP, and that’s where she met Bohbot.

“The pay cut was tough, but I felt so much happier about what I was doing,” Riles said. “I remember when I was working at Brobeck, I would have dreams that it was Saturday, and I would wake up so happy. Then I realized it was not, and I just didn’t want to get out of bed. I haven’t had that dream since I left.”

About a year later, the partners at that firm decided to part ways, leaving Bohbot and Riles at a crossroads. Bohbot had just turned 30, bought a house and was pregnant with her first child when she got word of the split. Suddenly, she and Riles both were out of work with important decisions ahead of them.

“For me, I knew I couldn’t start over,” Bohbot said. “So I decided I’m going to start my own firm. This wasn’t exactly how I wanted to do it; I thought maybe I would become a partner at a smaller firm first. It was much sooner than I anticipated, but

I said I’m just going to do it, and if worse comes to worse, I’ll go find a job. Elizabeth, on the other hand, said ‘you’re absolutely crazy.’”

They opened the firm in January 2003, in the beginning sharing the space with their old bosses, who weren’t able to get out of their lease. They took some cases, worked things out and were able to settle a big case not too long after they opened, Bohbot recalled, allowing them to go out and find their own office. They’ve been together ever since.

At first, it was absolutely terrifying to be running their own firm, Bohbot said. But there was an element of excitement and adventure, despite the financial struggles. One thing that was not problematic was the landscape of the partnership. “I think we were very much at peace with the fact that we knew we were doing the right thing and doing it with the right person,” Bohbot said. “It helped tremendously that we were equals, both in how long we’d been out of law school, how long we’d been practicing. We knew going in there wasn’t one with an advantage over the other. That also helped facilitate our thought process, where we knew from the beginning money was not a priority – doing what we love to do was a priority, and enjoying our lives and our families. It was the right decision at the time, and we kind of just knew it.”

### Work and play

During their leisure time, both women enjoy traveling, staying fit and spending time with their families. Riles has been married for 10 years and has two children, ages 7 and 4. Bohbot is going on 23 years of marriage and also has two kids, both 14. The pair also give back to the legal profession, each in her own way. Riles volunteers with the California Employment Lawyers Association and has served as a mediator and board member for the SEEDS Community Resolution Center in Berkeley since 2009. Bohbot is the president-elect of the San Francisco Trial Lawyers Association, where she has been a board member since 2011 and does a lot of volunteer work.



In the area of advising today's young and aspiring attorneys, here's what the two had to say:

"I would tell them to really listen to themselves," Riles said. "Take a deep breath, focus, listen to those inner voices talking to you, whether they're talking to you about asking a question at deposition

or talking to you about whether or not you should take this case or you need a break and you need to take a vacation."

Bohbot agreed and added this: "Practice what you love. Don't get into this if you're not going to do what you love because it's hard work. And always remember we are all here to help each other out.

Reach out to lawyers who have been around awhile, and don't be afraid to ask questions."

*Stephen Ellison is a freelance writer based in San Jose. Contact him at [ssjellison@aol.com](mailto:ssjellison@aol.com).*

