

## Q&A > department

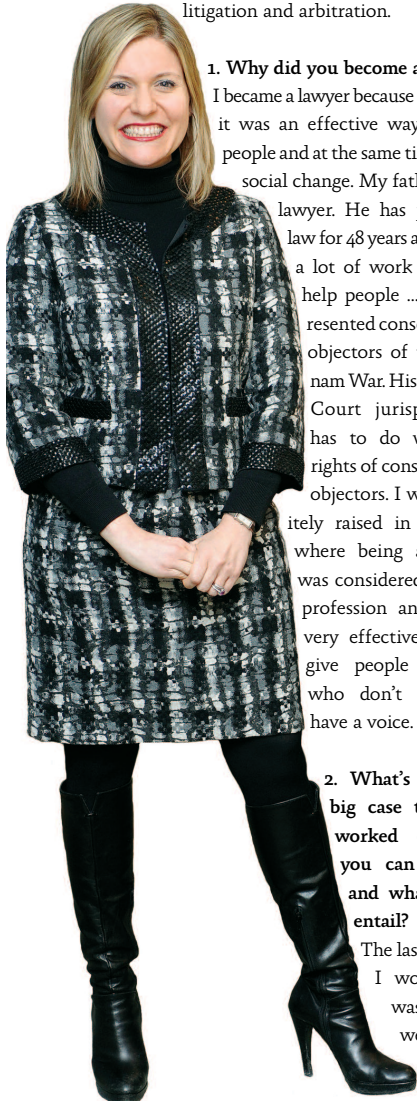
### Rachael Pontikes

Age: 36

**Family:** She is married to Bob Keenan.

**Education:** She received her undergraduate degree from Wesleyan University in Connecticut in 1996 and her law degree from the University of Chicago Law School in 2001.

**Profession:** A partner at Duane Morris, her practice involves general and commercial litigation. She represents foreign companies in disputes in the United States, acts as a liaison for American companies that are sued abroad, represents companies in inter- and intra-company disputes and represents financial institutions in a broad range of commercial litigation and arbitration.



#### 1. Why did you become a lawyer?

I became a lawyer because I thought it was an effective way to help people and at the same time effect social change. My father was a lawyer. He has practiced law for 48 years and he did a lot of work to really help people ... He represented conscientious objectors of the Vietnam War. His Supreme Court jurisprudence has to do with the rights of conscientious objectors. I was definitely raised in a house where being a lawyer was considered a noble profession and also a very effective way to give people a voice who don't normally have a voice.

#### 2. What's the last big case that you worked on that you can discuss, and what did it entail?

The last big case I worked on was a four-week jury trial in New

York where we represented an Italian wine producer. This case came to me because I speak fluent Italian. I lived in Milan for two years between college and law school. It came to me through my contacts in Milan. A really interesting piece of the case was I was able to actually use my language skills when I was examining witnesses, when I was preparing witnesses. It was really interesting because I was the only attorney in the courtroom who spoke fluent Italian and fluent English. And it was an enormous strategic advantage, much more so than I had thought previously. It wasn't just the language piece that helped me, but there was also the cultural component where I had to put myself inside my client's head and think about how my client would be viewing this situation. ...

My client's testimony was being communicated through a translator. How that all interplayed was fascinating and it really made use of some of my best skills and also very taxing skills because I had to look, listen and react in multiple languages throughout the trial. It was a breach of contract dispute between an Italian winemaker and their American importer. The Italian winemaker [our client] was the defendant and the plaintiff asked for \$12 million. At the end of the case they received zero and we received a half-million dollars in our counterclaim. ...

#### 3. What's the strangest thing that's happened to you as a lawyer?

I'm representing an American client who is being sued in Italy. We showed up for a hearing in Sicily and our opposing counsel was an hour and a half late to the hearing and no one batted an eyelash. I was told that was all routine and we should go get an espresso and everything would be fine. That's probably my most recent strange experience.

#### 4. If you could have lunch with anyone, living or dead, who would it be and why?

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I would like to have lunch with her because what she was really effective at doing as a litigator was using laws that were not necessarily created for the advancement of the rights of women and she was able to take those laws and she was able to use them in discrimination cases that she argued ... She was able to put them in a way during a time period to help

people and those judges understand what the women were going through and help them achieve their rights. It was really an admirable skill for a litigator ... If you look at her history as a litigator that was one of the most amazing things she did for all of us and I'm, of course, eternally grateful for that.

#### 5. What is your favorite TV show, movie, book or play about lawyers and why?

I think my favorite television show about lawyers is "The Good Wife." I like it because I think parts of it are realistic and the parts that are realistic are not sometimes the rigmarole of what happens in litigation. But the realistic parts are the dilemmas you face when representing a client and you are trying to do it ethically.

They are trying to incorporate the story, but there is such a moral complexity to practicing law. I think "The Good Wife" accurately represents the human aspect, the human piece of being a lawyer. ...

#### 6. What advice do you have for new lawyers?

First, I think you have to be patient. This is a quote from my dad, "They call it the practice of law for a reason. That's because you have to practice." You won't come out of law school knowing how to do everything and knowing how to do it perfectly. You need experience and you need practice. A key component in that is attitude, and part of that attitude is patience. It can be very frustrating to read tons and tons of cases and not find the answer, but you have to keep persevering until you get it right.

It's very difficult, particularly at the beginning of your practice, to understand where you are and to understand how to do things in the manner that needs to be done. If you are patient and you persevere and you are dedicated you will become the kind of lawyer you want to be. ... My other piece of advice is you need to be true to yourself. If you don't like transactional work then don't do transactional work. Do what you are passionate about ...

#### 7. What's your favorite Chicago restaurant?

My favorite Chicago restaurant is Pegasus. And yes, I am Greek - full disclosure. I think all the Greek restaurants are fantastic, but if I had to choose one I would choose Pegasus. ■

By Olivia Clarke