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IP Committee Chair: Technology Reshaping Upstate's Legal Market

By GREGORY FROOM

Legal Editor

The electronic filing of patents and trademarks has marked a "big move" in the intellectual property field, says Greenville attorney Sara A. Centioni, the incoming chair of the State Bar's IP and Unfair Trade Practices Committee.

A native of Bergamo, Italy, Centioni practices with the law firm of Nexsen Pruet where she focuses on patents and trademarks with a special concentration on biotechnology litigation.



The Upstate's proximity to the Interstate 85 corridor, which runs between Charlotte, N.C. and Atlanta, makes it a natural for a flourishing IP legal community, Centioni told Lawyers Weekly.

During her term as committee chair, Centioni said she hopes to boost member enthusiasm and participation so that the group can become a better resource for IP lawyers across the state.

The text of her e-mail interview with Lawyers Weekly follows.

Q: What are the major trends that you are seeing in intellectual property law?

A: Currently, there is a big move within the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office toward electronic filing. Most, if not all, trademark matters can now be dealt with electronically, and soon this will be the case for patent matters.

Also, an emerging technology that is playing a big role in IP is nanotechnology. Nanotechnology can be applicable in many different fields, from

chemistry to computer science. Accordingly, it is the subject of many new patents and patent applications.

Q: What facet of IP law does your practice primarily concentrate on? Is your practice focused more on litigation, or on helping clients to avoid litigation?

A: I focus on assisting clients in obtaining patents and trademark registrations issued by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Although this can help to avoid litigation, clients that own patents and trademark registrations must sometimes employ litigation to enforce their rights.

Q: In terms of "market presence," how does IP/patent law rank as a legal practice in Greenville — or South Carolina generally? Is it a growing field? What business factors are influencing its development?

A: Currently, there is a greater concentration of IP lawyers in the Upstate region. Greenville's strategic location between the larger markets of Charlotte and Atlanta may have contributed to this. IP law, however, is a continuously growing field, so it is likely that the need for IP lawyers throughout South Carolina will also grow. Business factors influencing this development can include an increase in research and development, competition in the marketplace and overall demand for technology-based goods and services.

Q: What sort of issues do you expect to grapple with during your term as committee chair?

A: In the past, membership participation in the IP Committee has been lacking. During my term, I plan to focus on increasing enthusiasm for the committee, as well as increasing member involvement, so that it can become a valuable and beneficial resource for those involved in IP law.

Q: Describe your typical day at the office (as if there were such a thing).

A: I spend most of my day in front of a computer drafting documents, such as patent applications, responses to correspondences from patent and trademark examiners, and letters to clients. I spend the rest of my time meeting new clients who are typically very enthusiastic to show me what will possibly be the next great invention. That is my favorite part of the day.



Centioni

Q: How has Nexsen Pruet's merger with Adams Kleemeier helped the firm's IP practice to expand? How much interaction is there between the firm's South Carolina and North Carolina offices when it comes to IP/patent law?

A: Nexsen Pruet's merger with Adams Kleemeier has provided the firm with a strong presence not only in North Carolina, but also in the Research Triangle Park, which is an area having a great need for IP and patent attorneys. The firm's South Carolina and North Carolina offices work as a united team in growing and diversifying the IP practice within the firm.

A Personal Glimpse

Q: We noticed on your firm's Web site bio that you were born in Italy and speak fluent Italian. What role have your linguistic abilities and international exposure played in your career's development?

A: Having been raised by Italian parents, both my linguistic abilities and my close cultural ties to Italy have been helpful in marketing potential Italian clients. Additionally, I am sometimes asked to serve as an interpreter in various legal matters involving Italian clients.

Q: As an IP attorney, how important was it that you had a background in science and how has that knowledge assisted you with your work?

A: In fact, having at least a bachelor's degree in a hard science is a requirement to sit for the patent bar. My background in biochemistry, therefore, opened the door for me to become a patent attorney. Generally, having a technical background also assists me in understanding technology-based inventions.

Q: What is the best place in Greenville to socialize with other lawyers?

A: Corner Pocket is a great place to meet and socialize with other attorneys. It is located in the downtown area, and has a great atmosphere.

Q: What is your favorite legal book? Favorite legal movie?

A: My favorite legal book is probably the *Pelican Brief* by John Grisham. My favorite legal movie is *A Few Good Men*.

Q: What was last place you went on vacation? How do you spend your weekends?

A: The last place I went on vacation was New York City. I spend most of my weekends relaxing by the pool or the beach reading a book. I also enjoy playing tennis, especially with my dad.

Q: What is your favorite restaurant in the Upstate? Its best meal?

A: My favorite restaurant in the Upstate is Sushi Koji on Haywood Road. Its best meal is a combination of sashimi, spicy tuna roll and rainbow roll.

Q: How would you rate Greenville as a locale for a young lawyer in the early stages of her career?

A: Greenville is a wonderful place for a young lawyer. As if the beautiful area and good restaurants were not enough, the Greenville County Bar is thought to be the most collegial in the state.

SARA CENTIONI

Sara Centioni practices in the areas of intellectual property, computers and technology, and litigation.

Her focus is on all phases of patent and trademark prosecution, and as well as on intellectual property litigation, particularly biotechnology litigation.

A native of Bergamo, Italy, and fluent in Italian and conversant in Spanish, Centioni is educated and experienced in biochemistry.

While attending Furman University, Centioni became familiar with standard analytical chemistry instrumentation, synthesized anti-tumor drugs and led teams in synthesizing DNA-interactive molecules.

While attending the University of South Carolina Law School, she was a member of Phi Delta Phi and the Student Bar Association

FIRM

- Nexsen Pruet, Greenville

EDUCATION

- Furman University, B.S., 1996
- Furman University, M.S., 1997
- University of South Carolina, J.D., 2000

BAR AND COURT ADMISSIONS

- South Carolina
- U.S. Patent and Trademark Office

CIVIC AND PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

- American Bar Association
- Richland County Bar Association
- South Carolina Bar

LANGUAGES

- Italian • Spanish

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION