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Meet Attorney Lisa Pirozzolo, Finalist for Attorney of the Year

By Emily Cousins

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Lisa Pirozzolo, a Boston-based partner at Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr, is one of the finalists for Attorney of the Year at the New England Legal Awards.

Pirozzolo is a general commercial litigator with a focus on intellectual property and patents.

One of Pirozzolo's clients is Exelixis, a small cancer drug development company. Jeffrey Hessekiel, the general counsel for Exelixis, said she is helping the company deal with patent disputes between it and a generic drug company that wants to invalidate Exelixis' patents.

Hessekiel said Pirozzolo is a sought-after attorney in her field, but what makes her unique is her ability to explain complicated issues to other team members and clients.

"Some lawyers feel compelled to show off their knowledge; their own insecurity drives them to want to impress," Hessekiel said. "Lisa has a quiet confidence, and she impresses without having to be self-important or needlessly formal. As you work with her, you see that she deserves the position that she's achieved and the respect that she has gained. ... She is just a steady, smart, reasonable litigator, and that makes her very dependable."

Pirozzolo was an editor for a local weekly newspaper in Leominster, Massachusetts, when she graduated from college. Her dad was an attorney with a small firm in Boston, and she knew if she



Courtesy photo

**Lisa Pirozzolo of
Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr.**

ever did decide to pursue the law, she wanted to be a litigator.

She earned a law degree from Cornell Law School in 1992 and directly joined her current firm, which was called Hale and Dorr at the time. She jumped into the litigation department, and joined teams working on many patent cases.

"I actually gravitated to the life sciences work because I found it super interesting to learn about how these new medicines are developed and how inventors tackle treating different disease conditions," Pirozzolo said. "Essentially, these cases provide an opportunity to really learn about how that

occurs, learn about the disease condition and then explain it to a judge or a jury.”

Pirozzolo said when she approaches a new case, she thinks back to how she would approach mapping out complex issues for the general public while working as a journalist.

“I didn’t have a technical background myself,” Pirozzolo said. “I majored in classics in college. I used a little bit of my early journalism experience to explain things that laypeople might not understand, and that I didn’t understand until I dove into it.”

In the last year some of Pirozzolo’s biggest wins have been in her pro bono practice. For example, Boston agreed to pay \$2.6 million in November 2023 to settle claims in a federal lawsuit that alleged a hair follicle drug test disproportionately identified Black members of the police force as drug users.

“The challenge was to the test and the disparate impact and discriminatory impact on Black police officers,” Pirozzolo said. “Our clients in the case were Black police officers who faced serious employment consequences when they tested positive on the hair test. Some of them were terminated from employment, and another was a police cadet who was not allowed to enter the police academy.”

During the trial, Pirozzolo said she and her team presented evidence that the test “can’t really distinguish between drugs in the hair from ingestion or just exposure.” They argued the hair test can be used for screening, but it’s not reliable. In addition, Pirozzolo said that one piece of evidence showed that higher rates of melanin in the hair are highly susceptible to retaining residue from a drug, and this led to false positives.

“The city of Boston, actually, abandoned the hair test as part of its Movement to End Racism after the George Floyd murder in the summer of 2020,” she said.

In addition, Pirozzolo also represented a group of incarcerated deaf and hearing-impaired people who alleged that the Department of Correction violated the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act because there was not an alarm

system or evacuation plan for them. After a trial, the department was ordered to provide adequate emergency notifications.

Iván Espinoza-Madrugal, executive director of Lawyers for Civil Rights, has seen firsthand Pirozzolo’s hard work during her pro bono cases. “She is a force to be reckoned with,” he said.

“Many lawyers take on pro bono matters, but they don’t necessarily want to take on a matter that is going to involve protracted litigation and federal court for 10 years,” Espinoza-Madrugal said. “Yet, Lisa has done those cases when others have turned those pro bono opportunities down. ... That framing of not thinking about pro bono engagements as transactional but more as transformative opportunities is a defining characteristic of her leadership. It sets her apart from other lawyers who may be interested in pro bono work, but not if it’s a heavy lift.”

Within the legal field, Pirozzolo said it is heartening to see how the profession has become more diverse since she started out as a young attorney in the 1990s. It was especially difficult for her as a woman with children, but she said her firm was open to new ideas to make things easier on working parents.

“For a while, I worked remotely two days a week, which now seems ordinary, obviously, but in the 90s, it was not,” Pirozzolo said. “The firm gave me a fax modem to use at my house, and I would cart big boxes of documents back and forth. At times it was a challenge to navigate that but really worthwhile.”

William Lee, a partner at Wilmer and Pirozzolo’s mentor, described her as a “pioneer” in “trying to experiment with different arrangements for young parents that would make it possible to be a member of the firm, but also be a good family member.”

“She is intellectually gifted, but more importantly, she has wonderful judgment, and is a person of great integrity with great emotional intelligence. ... Emotional intelligence is not something that all lawyers have, but she is able to take her ... gifts and translate them into meaningful relationships and advice to real-world people who need help.”