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CHRISTINE D. SPAGNOLI — "I liked the day-to-day hands-on, helping people solve problems," she said of her time as a district field representative. "The underdog was prominent in what we were doing."

Political Stint Leads to Law School

Profile

Cristine D. Spagnoli
Attorney
Santa Monica

Practice areas: Product liability, professional liability, insurance bad faith, wrongful death, automobile, civil rights and other consumer and tort actions

Career highlights: Partner, Greene, Broillet, Taylor, Wheeler and Panish, 1998-present; associate, Greene, Broillet, Taylor, Wheeler and Panish, 1986-1998

Law school: Loyola School of Law, 1986

Age: 43

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Political Activities Fueled Passion for Helping Underdog

Plaintiffs' Attorney Called
'A Passionate Advocate'
Who 'Stands Her Ground'

By Anne La Jeunesse
Daily Journal Staff Writer

When people speak of The Passion of Christine Spagnoli, they are not discussing the newest best-selling romantic potboiler. They are speaking of the devotion the Santa Monica attorney brings to her cases and clients.

Spagnoli, 43, has spent her 14-year legal career at Greene, Broillet, Taylor, Wheeler & Panish, where she started in 1984 as a law clerk while attending Loyola Law School in Los Angeles.

Since her hiring as an attorney with the firm in 1986, Spagnoli has worked on some compelling personal injury and product liability cases and has garnered lucrative settlements and jury verdicts for clients, including last year's multibillion-dollar verdict against General Motors for a family critically burned in a rear-end collision.

Name partner Bruce Broillet, to whom Spagnoli was assigned as a law clerk, said the firm does not expand frequently enough to keep all interns, but Spagnoli was different.

"She was a keeper," Broillet said. "She's extremely smart, a tireless worker, a passionate advocate and a tough competitor. She stands her ground, she maintains her judgment and once she has formed her position on a case, she is one tough opponent."

Attending law school, Spagnoli said, was not exactly a whim, but sort of a natural outgrowth of a political career she had established after graduating from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1978 with a political science degree at age the age of 21.

She served as an intern in Washington, D.C., for Indiana Rep. Floyd Fithian. "It's gotten a bad name," Spagnoli quipped, referring to the Monica Lewin-

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sky debacle. "But, it's actually a great thing to do."

Then she came back to California and began a local political career.

She had been working as a district field representative for then Assemblyman Mike Roos for seven years when friend Patricia Y. Trendacosta, then a lobbyist for government relations who was contemplating going to law school, told Spagnoli that she should also think about a new path.

"There was no way that I could not work and just go to school," Spagnoli said. "I decided to find the best night law school program in Los Angeles, and Loyola was it."

She and Trendacosta were late in applying, Spagnoli recalled, and "begged" to be admitted. Finally, after numerous calls to the school, they were enrolled as Nos. 125 and 126, the last two students admitted that term.

"We kind of put all our lobbying skills to work] ... and they finally found spaces for us," said Trendacosta, now an attorney with Frandzel & Share in Los Angeles.

Trendacosta said that her law school pal's stint in politics fighting for the little guy is a trait that has served her well as an advocate.

"She's very idealistic," Trendacosta said. "She has to believe in whatever she does, and when she does, she's relentless."

"She has a tremendous drive and focus and ability to get things done when she believes in an issue," Trendacosta added. "She gives 110 percent, not only to the legal aspects but to the moral and ethical ramifications of a case."

Spagnoli, a native of Long Island, N.Y., started working for Roos as an unpaid intern and soon was a field representative handling constituent services in the Silver Lake-Echo Park areas.

"People in our district included senior citizens whose MediCal would get cut off or who lived in slum apartments," Spagnoli said.

Partnering up with Los Angeles Councilman John Ferraro in a shared district office, she helped establish "one-stop shopping" for constituents, making it easier for them to get their concerns and needs addressed, she said.

"When they came to us for help, we were not going to send them somewhere else," Spagnoli said. "We'd grease the skids for them to try to help people with their day-to-day problems by giving a high level of service."

The district, she said, included some of the city's poorest and most underrepresented people, including many illegal immigrants, and not many voters.

A hot line was established so that district residents could report slum-housing conditions, get advice on renter's rights and get information through a crime-watch effort.

She said she particularly enjoyed her office's launching of the "Free Griffith Park" campaign to prevent admission fees to the area's only recreation zone for many poor residents.

"I think I liked the day-to-day hands-on, helping people solve problems," Spagnoli said. "The underdog was prominent in that we were doing."

Santa Monica resident Leslie Harrison, client, considers Spagnoli a close friend.

Spagnoli represented Harrison in a wrongful death case against Robertson Honda in Hollywood stemming from the death of her only son, Corey, who had been a Robertson employee.

Corey Harrison was 23 and a U.S. Army veteran when the refurbished motorcycle he bought from his employer experienced a rear-wheel lockup, sending him into a tragic skid and collision. Harrison said she had filed a lawsuit against Robertson Honda to get money for the costly convalescent home and medical equipment needs for her son, including a special hospital bed, and was ready to drop the action when he died three years later.

Those three years held many memorable moments, like decorating his room at Christmas although she could not be sure he was aware of her efforts, and sneaking puppies in so her animal-loving son could be with creatures he adored. It also had grueling moments Harrison said she now regrets, like keeping Corey on a feeding tube and prolonging his death.

"Hope is a cruel thing," she said.

After Corey died, she was referred to Greene Broillett and met Spagnoli.

"I was incapable of taking care of myself," Harrison said. "She proved to be very diligent and trustworthy and loving, the kind of person who, when she walks in, gives you a hug and makes you feel as comfortable as she could. I just turned my life over to Chris."

Spagnoli went so far as to have motorcycles tested at the Bonneville Salt Flats and conducted a critical video-taped interview with a prison inmate who provided crucial testimony about Robertson Honda's alleged tampering with documents that proved the motorcycle her son bought was defective. That was a huge gamble, Harrison said, but the jury realized the man was telling the truth.

Harrison said she was thrilled when she learned in 1998 that Spagnoli had become a partner in the firm.

"It was long overdue and well deserved," Harrison said. "The woman is a workhorse."

Rita "Sunny" Miller, formerly a civil defense attorney with Munger Tolles & Olson and a recently appointed Los Angeles Superior Court judge, has opposed Spagnoli in court.

"She's very tough, very good on her feet, very effective, formidable," Miller said.

Author and Pepperdine School of Law adjunct professor Patti Pannicia was represented by Spagnoli and Greene Broillett partner John Taylor when she sued CNN for wrongful termination and pregnancy discrimination after the network fired her from her reporter position when she became pregnant.

"They really are a moral law firm and successful enough they can afford to be," Pannicia said. "I'll always be grateful for John Taylor and Christine Spagnoli for never doubting my story, for never making money an issue. They really get behind a case and support you, whereas some lawyers just bleed you."

Pannicia, the author of "Work Smarts for Women: The Essential Sex Discrimination Survival Guide," and no slouch in the brains department herself, called Spagnoli "one of the smartest lawyers I know."

Longtime friend and political colleague of Spagnoli, State Treasurer Phil Angelides was so eager to praise her that he called on a cellular telephone while racing through an airport to catch a plane. Angelides was Roos' chief of staff in Sacramento and was Spagnoli's boss when she worked in Roos' Los Angeles office.

He said he has known Spagnoli for about 20 years and fondly recalls the days when both toiled in politics and were among a group of young people idealistically pursuing progressive approaches to problems and issues.

"It's been nice to see Christine going from being a legislative staffer to just an incredibly talented attorney," Angelides said. "Let's just say she's tops."

"I always knew her as a person of good values," he added. "I think she really found her arena as a plaintiffs' attorney because she has a real passion for it."

Spagnoli has always worked doggedly for the poor, the elderly and to help struggling neighborhoods gather strength, he said. "I'm immensely proud of what she's done, and it's really great to see a genuine friend break new ground as a top woman attorney."

Spagnoli seems nearly as passionate about her bicycling activities as she is about her career. She has cycled throughout Tuscany, Ireland, France, including the Dordogne region southeast of Bordeaux, Spain, Portugal and New Zealand, and said she makes lifelong friends on many trips.

Her next trip will be cycling through Provence next month after she delivers a seminar in Paris for lawyers interested in the \$5 billion GM verdict.

"There's a lot of lawyers who want to know how the hell that case turned out," she said as she nimbly maneuvered around her Wilshire Boulevard office, careful not to bump into large courtroom exhibits propped against the walls.

If a cycling trip is not on the near horizon, however, Spagnoli can get a brief respite from the stress of her work merely by leaning back in her comfortable leather chair and gazing out the large ocean-front window of her 21st floor office, where she can watch people playing and strolling along Santa Monica Beach.

"Dolphins, sometimes I see dolphins," she said in a rare, wistful moment.