

# ELENI KOUIMELIS

## Environmental Lawyer Sees Her Practice as a Driven Journey

by Dan Campana



It might be easy to dismiss as cliché the idea Eleni Kouimelis knew she wanted to be a lawyer from an early age, but that would unfairly diminish the meaningfulness of her journey.

Born in Greece, she came to Chicago with her family at a young age and recognized relatively soon after that she sought a path not rooted entirely in cultural norms. Her direction and drive would be bolstered by the example set by her mother and father.

“My parents were both factory workers basically, and they both worked very hard,” she says. “I wanted to make them proud and pursue a different path. I decided law was a career I wanted to pursue.”

Her determined pursuit was based in the idea—one she strongly believes in to this day—that you have to set your sights on a goal and not let someone else dictate whether you achieve it.

“One thing I tell young people is they need to take their own destiny into their own hands,” Kouimelis explains. “It’s up to each of us to create our destiny.”

She leads by example. Her years of hard work paid off in 1989 when she landed at **Winston & Strawn LLP** where she remains today as a partner

and chair of the firm’s environmental law practice. While admittedly modest, Kouimelis understands there’s much to be taken away from her story that began in the tiny Greek village of Lahanada and continues today with a family she’s proud of and a career she remains passionate about.

### Defying Convention, Finding Inspiration

Kouimelis moved with her family from Lahanada because of Greek politics and the traditional view of seeking opportunities in America. They landed on Chicago’s West Side when she was five years old. Within a few years, the idea of becoming a lawyer one day developed.

“I had a sense the law was a good way to serve, do justice and have a professional job,” she explains. “For whatever reason, that was my thinking at age 10, and it stuck with me.”

After graduating from Trinity High School in River Forest, Kouimelis prepared for the next step, which was college. Doing so conflicted with some aspects of her culture.

“The Greek immigrant tradition is that girls get married young and go off and do that for a living,” Kouimelis offers. “So, I kind of broke my mother’s heart a bit, but now she’s proud of me.”

She chose the University of Illinois at Chicago for her undergraduate studies and Loyola University Chicago School of Law, both nods to staying close to home. Kouimelis worked her way through college, which prompted her decision to continue working and enroll in Loyola’s night program for her first year. She switched to the day program during the second year, taking extra classes to make sure she still graduated with her law degree in three years.

Kouimelis took away more than legal knowledge from the first year in night school. She was surrounded by classmates who balanced families, jobs and school. They brought real-world experiences into the mix. Kouimelis believes the environment helped her mature more quickly than if she had run the course with traditional students.

She also picked up guidance and invaluable knowledge from Nina Appel, the school’s dean, and from the famous constitutional law professor, George Anastaplo. Kouimelis recalls his “unbelievable legal mind” and the way he would weave baseball analogies into lectures. Appel provided inspiration, as well.

“She was a woman who was articulate, thoughtful, kind and definitely a force to be

reckoned with,” Kouimelis says.

She points to her home country and family for her interest in environmental law. Greece struggled to care for its natural resources and environment when Kouimelis was younger, she says. Two cousins were politically active with environmental issues in the '60s and '70s, which Kouimelis believes put them ahead of their time in that area of focus.

“It struck me how important that job was,” she says of engaging in environmental oversight.

The environmental law sector also attracted her because of its scientific component and the fact that more women were involved in the area.

After graduating Loyola in 1985, with all those factors in mind, she took a job with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as assistant regional counsel based in Chicago for a multistate jurisdiction. She worked in the “Air, Water and Toxic” section—as it was then known—with a focus on the Clean Air Act and asbestos issues.

She recalls working a complex statute case against a utility company in Wisconsin that was “fascinating,” but within a few years she grew weary of bureaucracy’s slow pace.

With that came recognition of the limits placed on government action, despite its role in trying to protect the public. Corporate America was ahead of the curve in terms of innovation and environmental stewardship, she thought.

“Government serves a purpose, but I’m not uncomfortable going to the other side,” Kouimelis remembers thinking at the time.

With that in mind, change would soon follow.

## Attracted to Winston’s Environment

Talk about a busy year in 1989. Kouimelis not only was hired at Winston, but she also married her “one and only”—her husband, Nick—and moved into the home where they’ve raised their three daughters. She’s also a Cubs fan, so the team’s division title that year probably also ranks somewhere among her standout moments.

So much about Winston made it “a very good fit for me,” she says. Aside from being a premiere firm and good platform for her area of focus, it offered her “great training in very sophisticated work.”

Her environmental practice involves compliance, transactions and representing clients in enforcement proceedings in jurisdictions around the country. Kouimelis also advises on how to deal with remediation and redevelopment of contaminated sites.

“Whenever a company buys, sells or refinances securities, there is often an environmental component,” she explains.

“The typical process is to conduct due diligence, identify the liability/risk, allocate the risk among the parties and negotiate appropriate protection for the client in the contract or via another vehicle, such as purchasing insurance. I have worked on literally hundreds of multimillion and billion dollar deals over the years in a wide variety of industries and jurisdictions around the world.”

Beyond the work experience, she’s benefited from a setting at Winston that recognizes the importance of family. Her daughters were born in a four-year span in the early 1990s. Kouimelis became

one of the first attorneys to make partner at the firm while working part time, as she did during that portion of her career.

Reaching that stage under those circumstances is a testament to her level of work and dedication in her first few years, she believes. Kouimelis worked with a senior partner on the rollout of an audit program for a Fortune 500 manufacturer. She spent time on the ground in plants to see operations firsthand, something she calls “invaluable experience.”

“It’s one thing to sit in Chicago and tell the plant manager ... ‘Here’s what the law says and here’s what you must do,’” she explains. “It doesn’t translate very well on the factory floor.

“That was like a godsend of a project because it just let me understand you need to be conscientious of who your clients are and what the reality of their world is, and to be respectful of their time,” Kouimelis adds.

Jennifer Nijman, who previously worked at Winston, says Kouimelis was already “highly respected in the firm and the go-to person for environmental issues” when she arrived at the firm in 1994.

“Over the years, she has excelled in the environmental arena,” Nijman offers. “Clients love working with her, as do lawyers in the firm or outside, because they see her abilities along with her easygoing style putting everyone else at ease. She

**“Whenever a company buys, sells or refinances securities, there is often an environmental component,”**

has a practical approach to solving client issues, and manages to push through difficult situations with grace and eloquence.”

Kouimelis says her approach very much fits into the Winston mindset for client services.

“Winston is a very problem-solving, practical, efficient firm,” she explains. “I’m very loyal to the firm and how it is managed by Tom Fitzgerald, our current managing partner.”

Her consistent style comes while working in a practice area where change is always noticeable, Kouimelis says. Congress is reactionary to major issues—such as Love Canal in the 1970s and Superfund sites—that spurred improved laws relating to contamination. Society’s general awareness continues to grow in the areas of sustainability and social awareness. Those are some of the factors in how Kouimelis’ practice has evolved with her corporate clients.

Best practices and audit programs are in place for most clients, and many companies have become more sophisticated in their internal oversight of operations. EPA enforcement has slowed down after the government shut down.

Kouimelis says that’s good for businesses, but not necessarily for her practice since she’s handling fewer action notices. Corporate mindsets have changed to a focus on minimizing or avoiding waste creation or air emissions, while also promoting their positive efforts in a way that draws the right amount of

attention.

“It’s evolving into less pollution and less waste and ... how to market that,” she says.

That doesn’t mean there aren’t looming issues in the field, with water being top of mind for Kouimelis.

“Water increasingly is becoming a huge focus because it’s such a scarce resource, particularly in the West,” she explains.

## A Gold Standard in Guidance

Balancing a busy practice and family hasn’t kept Kouimelis from finding her way to help others inside and outside the profession. She previously served on the board of Rainbow House, an organization that works with women and children dealing with domestic violence issues.

The Hellenic Bar Association of Illinois is “near and dear to my heart,” she says. Kouimelis will be installed as the organization’s president in June 2014 with a goal to strengthen mentoring and networking opportunities for Greek attorneys.

“I think there is an endless need, especially given how the market has tanked since 2008. So many of these young people today graduate with significant law school debt and then no prospects of getting a job in the near term,” Kouimelis explains.

She’s offered guidance to one young woman who graduated from Northwestern and then University of Southern California Gould School of Law: Only go one year without finding work.

“I feel very committed to help people like that,” she says, adding she has a number of such relationships within the bar. “I want to do a good job by them.”

Current Hellenic Bar President Tom Skallas credits Kouimelis for giving her time to helping young attorneys, as well as planning events and assisting in judicial reviews.

“It was Eleni who formalized our mentoring program,” Skallas says, adding she’s a perfect person for the role.

Skallas believes Kouimelis is the right person for the top spot, in part because of her ability to lead the push for diversity among the membership. Traditionally, members have come from government positions, such as a prosecutor’s office, or from small firms. Skallas illustrates his respect for Kouimelis by mentioning he’s repeatedly tried to convince her to join his firms on multiple occasions, only to be turned down each time.

“She’s sort of the gold standard in our organization,” Skallas explains. “She brings that perspective of someone who has made it through that corporate culture.”

Kouimelis gravitates toward mentoring relationships where the young attorney is a self-starter and has the will to achieve. She likes to see others set their minds on goals and go after them, just as she has in her life.

“I came from this poor little village in Greece to a partner at Winston & Strawn. That journey for me is a big one,” Kouimelis says. “As I get older, I should be more comfortable saying that.”

Her daughters also benefit from her guidance.

“I always tell my girls, ‘You don’t control others. You control yourself, what you do and how hard you work,’” Kouimelis explains. ■