

ERIN KREJCI

Drafting Client Stories in Construction and Real Estate Disputes

by Elizabeth Davies

Every lawsuit has a story to tell. Erin E. Krejci's job is to tell them.

A partner at Laurie & Brennan LLP, Krejci is as much a storyteller as she is a lawyer. Sure, she handles complex, high-cost construction deals such as NFL stadiums, college campuses and swank city hotels. But she uses her writing skills to give her a leg up on the competition.

"In law school, what you're taught is very formulaic, and it overlooks the fact that your audience is a human being, not a machine," she says.

"You have to add character development and a storyline—essential elements of a compelling narrative. How else can you break down all of the pieces of a complex construction project in order to make someone care about it?"

So, when a client brings a case to Krejci, she immediately begins building a narrative. Her summary judgments tell their story and persuade a judge to see their point of view. She begins by introducing her cast of characters and the ways they have been wronged. She creates a theme in these court filings, weaving it throughout her document.

The goal, she says, is to make it so the judge or arbitrator "can't get that theme out of their head."

And more than once, she has had judges comment on the quality of her writing, saying, "based on these papers, I don't need to hear another word." That's the highest praise she could hope for.

"I take it as a personal win if they don't need an oral argument after reading something I wrote," she says.

START OF A LEGAL CAREER

Growing up in suburban Oak Lawn, Krejci's early years overflowed with the written word.

She kept busy with writing and theater during high school, then signed up for every writing class she could in college. At any given time—then and now—Krejci seems to have a novel in the works.

And indeed, writing is what first brought her to Laurie & Brennan in 2010. The firm was looking for someone to do the writing on several of their cases, a gig that was right up



Krejci's alley. What wasn't such a great fit was the topic.

"I knew nothing about construction," she says. "I hadn't done even one mechanics lien case."

So, because she wasn't entirely sold on the idea, Krejci agreed to test it out on a part-time basis. One week later, she loved it so much that she joined the firm full-time.

"I like being someone who is more behind the scenes," she says. "I like to tell the story."

While she enjoyed being a writer, Krejci felt her confidence in construction and real estate litigation growing. A few years after she wrote her first summary judgment brief for Laurie & Brennan, she began handling clients of her own. It turned out that she was strong in that arena, too.

"Erin works to not only provide sound legal advice to her clients but also to learn about their business practices so she can effectively handle each individual matter with an eye toward the overall implications for the client's business," says former colleague Deborah Kennedy, now senior counsel with Perkins Coie LLP.

"I admire Erin's ability to be a zealous advocate for her clients but to maintain an appropriate sense of practicality."

Still, her reputation as a writer lives on.

"One of Erin's greatest strengths is her ability to write clearly, concisely and persuasively," Kennedy says. "I have countless times asked Erin to review my own written work product, and she has always been able to find ways to make the final product stronger."

Krejci's peers at Laurie & Brennan know about her writing prowess as well.

"I am frequently asked to step in on cases to either help with writing or to start from scratch," she says. "Having a fresh set of eyes putting the puzzle pieces into a narrative is often very helpful."

This certainly wasn't what Krejci envisioned her career would look like. She was a psychology major at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, volunteering in her free time at juvenile detention centers. There, she saw kids who made mistakes. They were the same type of mistake any teen might make—only many of these teens didn't have the friends or family to pull them back on the right track.

"It wouldn't have turned into a life-altering experience if they had a support system," Krejci says. "It was a wrong I wanted to help right."

So, Krejci moved on to Georgetown University Law Center with plans of becoming a juvenile defense attorney. Her experiences with that work while still a student disturbed her, making it clear that she couldn't pursue a career in that type of law.

"It was very emotionally trying," she says. "I brought it home with me and was constantly on edge."

Instead, Krejci went into corporate law and found a home. For someone who once knew little about the construction industry, she has become a trusted expert for those around her.

Charles Hervas, of municipal litigation firm Hervas, Condon & Bersani, works as co-counsel with Krejci in a multimillion-dollar construction case. The suit includes allegations that a municipal wastewater treatment plant was improperly designed and built.

"Erin's work involved complex engineering concepts she studied, learned and transferred into legal positions that were concise and understandable," Hervas says. "Erin was invaluable in helping me understand construction law concepts when my strong area is civil rights and municipal law."

And it helped that her personality was easy to work with.

"Erin is a cheerful and enthusiastic player on the legal team," Hervas adds. "She keeps folks smiling, and she isn't afraid to grab the laboring oar and make things happen."

EXPERTISE AND WORK ETHIC

In 1993, Krejci was a golf caddy at Edgewood Valley Country Club in LaGrange, home to a collection of high net worth executives and occasional celebrities. Within a year of working there, she had become the members' most requested caddy.

Gerald Curran caddied alongside her then, and he is a client of hers today.

"Erin's recipe for success, even at that young age, was hard work, effort and respect," he recalls. "Erin would study pin placements and green break prior to a round to create a path to success for her member."

Now as chief financial officer at Synergy Construction Group LLC, Curran continues to admire Krejci's work ethic and character.

"Erin empowers her clients by getting to know them and their objectives on a professional and personal level, which allows for a more relational process in goal achievement, instead of a transactional approach," Curran says. "This allows both sides to speak freely and communicate more effectively."

He's quick to recall a multi-family real estate development that was at the brink of shut down after several lien-related issues.

"Erin and her team took the controls immediately and implemented a plan with several second-tier subcontractors to avoid a project shutdown, several mechanics liens, and kept our bank lending and saved us about \$500,000," he says. "This is a small example of



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the value Erin adds to every client, no matter the timing or complexity, and the dedication to her profession."

Another client, Bob Maffei of Perma-Pipe Inc., has a similar story. His company called on Krejci while involved in a lawsuit with the University of California. She learned the business and successfully negotiated a settlement between the parties before the case went to trial.

"In complex engineering/construction litigation, many lawyers rely on their client to handle the technical issues, and they stick to the legal issues," Maffei says. "Ms. Krejci, on the other hand, learns the technical aspects of the project, which helps her in preparing briefs and motions. Everything she did was well-researched and expertly presented. When the pressure was at its highest, she always remained calm and met every deadline."

ALWAYS EMBRACING CHALLENGES

At 39, Krejci is able to enjoy both the stability of her already-accomplished career and the potential in her growing family.

Her husband, Steve, is a former chef who now stays home to care for their baby daughter, Josephine. The family lives in a house they are flipping in her hometown of Oak Lawn, and Josephine's grandparents live nearby.

When Krejci is not caring for her baby, she enjoys camping and home improvement projects. The house they're flipping is another instance of getting her hands dirty and learning new skills. It falls in line with her volunteer work with Rebuilding Together Metro Chicago. She serves as president of the associate board of the organization, which helps people fix up their existing homes by assisting with improvement projects such as painting, yard clean-up or electrical work.

"Erin embraces a challenge, and despite balancing home and work life, she has fully committed to leading and growing our organization's young professionals board," says Tiffanie Tabrizi, development director for Rebuilding Together Metro Chicago.

"These kinds of projects take a long time to become sustainable, and I admire her for the dedication she shows in taking it on. Erin has gone from volunteering one day a year on our home repair projects to a person I look to for support on a weekly basis."

Krejci also feels strongly about pouring into the next generation of female lawyers and is developing a mentorship program at Laurie & Brennan. Beyond that, Krejci wants to see women playing an increased role in the construction industry. She's active in the Federation

of Women Contractors, which advocates for women-owned businesses and female executives in construction fields.

She is also a member of the American Bar Association's Forum on Construction Law, the Illinois State Bar Association's Construction Law Council and the Chicago Bar Association's Construction Law and Mechanics Lien committees.

Looking ahead, Krejci hopes to one day teach legal writing to law students. Her passion is to begin changing the scope of legal writing. She wants to show others how to persuade with the written word and that taking the time to develop a storyline can turn a good lawyer into a great one. After all, she's found it's one way to win a case.

"At the end of the day, judges want to do the right thing," she says. "And good writing can help them get there." ■