

Kristen Laughridge Gale

Commitment, Precision and Creative Solutions in Environmental Law

by Whitney Anderson

Illinois Senior Assistant Attorney General Jane McBride perfectly sums up a key facet of Kristen Laughridge Gale's approach to her work as an attorney: "She's dedicated, and she's been dedicated to the practice of environmental law for a long time."

McBride, a past colleague of Gale, echoes themes of tenacity, perseverance, commitment and congeniality that are often repeated by people who know Gale.

As an associate at **Nijman Franzetti, LLP**, Gale has quickly gained a reputation for her commitment to crafting positive solutions, for her diligent attention to detail, and for her impressive technical knowledge of environmental science and legislation.

At the close-knit environmental law firm,

Gale handles land issues, compliance, and litigation from federal cases to municipal matters. That wide range of people, companies, and situations often requires an expertise in reading the room and addressing issues with firm diplomacy.

"It's important to make sure our approach is the right level for what that situation requires," she says. "You have a lot of big personalities, and you have to make sure you're advocating properly for your client with those other personalities. But with a smaller situation, a small facility, your language is different, your posture is different, how you present your information is different."

Though accurately gauging and properly addressing concerns in that broad spectrum

of interactions can be challenging, it's one of Gale's favorite things about being an environmental lawyer. "What I like about being a lawyer and about being at Nijman Franzetti is that there's always something new," Gale says, "I enjoy having big cases and big issues with lots of parties and also having the balance of these small, but still important, cases — I enjoy the ebb and flow."

Gale always strives to find resolutions that balance the requirements of environmental law and the unique situations and needs of smaller companies with violations. In negotiating with a vehicle recycler with improperly stored car tires, Gale recognized that he would be unable to build the special storage building required by environmental



regulations. Instead, she suggested a workaround: loading the tires into a semitrailer and regularly shipping them out, a compromise between eliminating the environmental hazards caused by the improperly stored tires and the vehicle recycler's abilities. "Coming up with a creative solution like that is a really good day," Gale says.

What's unique about Gale's practice is that she interacts with smaller operations like this one but, as she says, "That same day you could be dealing with a huge multinational corporation and perhaps in that instance you might need to have a firmer hand since they may not see the violation is as severe as you do."

Gale's excellent memory and careful attention to detail make her successful in matters large and small. According to Jennifer Nijman, founding partner of Nijman Franzetti, this focus really sets her apart. "She really stays on top of every little piece of information that comes through." "She is currently handling for me a couple very large pieces of litigation...cases with 25 different defendants and six different claimants. There's a lot of information going back and forth, and she's able to keep them straight and keep them organized, which is a huge asset to us. She's got a lot of responsibility on her shoulders, and she handles it very well."

For Gale, this variety keeps her work exciting. "What I like about both (large and small matters) is that they're both fact-intensive," she says. "It might sound strange, but I love sitting with a pile of documents and going through till I find that 'nugget,' the important detail in the case."

Getting the information straight is essential to Gale's approach, as she is confident that having those facts and details correct makes coming to a solution easier. "I like to have the balance of my confidence in the facts with a humility in knowing I may not always be right," she says. "I know the facts, but I always go back to check the facts."

In her work at Nijman Franzetti, Gale's clearheaded focus benefits all her colleagues. "She stays calm and keeps us in line and organized, which we greatly appreciate," Nijman says.

Environmental Dedication

Not only is Gale skilled in legal practice, where she strives to continually deepen her understanding of environmental legal issues, she has a high degree of technical knowledge of the science behind those issues as well. Gale completed a Bachelor of Science in molecular environmental biology at the University of California, Berkeley, and spent time working for an international

environmental consulting firm.

In fact, Gale was introduced to environmental law while working as part of a team of environmental consulting experts for a law firm. In meetings between her research firm and the lawyers, Gale realized that she was even more interested in resolving the kinds of issues they were working on. "It was an illumination that this is where I should be," Gale remembers.

Gale wasted no time in pursuing her goal and graduated *cum laude* from the University of Illinois College of Law in 2004. Despite being recruited by a number of firms for intellectual property law, Gale was determined to pursue a career as an environmental attorney. "I went to law school to be an environmental lawyer," Gale says.

As environmental law is a highly competitive, highly focused field, Gale's tenacity and clear vision were essential to her success. Her crucial summer associate opportunity at Altheimer & Gray fell through when the firm shocked the legal community by unexpectedly dissolving in 2003. "I went to the firm that was going to put me in the environmental group, and they disappeared," Gale says. Nevertheless, she was committed to achieving her vision. She remembers thinking, "I set out to do this thing, and I'm going to do it."

Gale's strategy? "Tenacity, perseverance, and a lot of lunches," she laughs. With her characteristic persistence, Gale reached out to a former Altheimer & Gray attorney to gather new contacts and then sought to reach out to contacts of those contacts to find another firm.

Gale's driven networking and commitment to environmental law planted seeds for her future and more immediately provided her with an opportunity to work in the Environmental Bureau of the Illinois

Attorney General's office in Springfield. "They are great people, great resources, and great attorneys," Gale says enthusiastically. She believes that the experience laid a strong foundation for her current practice.

Speaking of her colleague Jane McBride, Gale says, "She really taught me to look at the facts and make sure those are all set before moving forward with an enforcement action."

Gale brought that attention to detail to bear on her litigation skills. "When you walk into a meeting or go in front of a judge, if you have the facts and the backup with you, people will believe you — your case is more credible," she says. "My ability to do that and my confidence in that came from the Attorney General's office."

According to McBride, Gale's skills and potential shined through from the start. "She displayed a lot of fortitude and energy right off the bat," McBride says. "She's personable and outgoing, and she had a lot of good qualities from the minute she started practicing."



From left: son Jacob, Gale, husband Lou Gale, son Henry

From Springfield to Chicago

The same fortitude that led Gale to the AG position also opened the doors for her next professional opportunity. One of Gale's initial contacts out of law school was Jennifer Nijman, who was in the process of forming the firm with Susan Franzetti. Though the budding firm did not have space right away, Gale was their first (and only) call when a position opened.

"She came highly recommended to us by another attorney here in the Chicago area," Nijman says, "and we have found all those recommendations to be very true."

Though the Attorney General's office was sorry to see her go, McBride says, "I applaud her for her fortitude and staying with it and finding her way. She's well-grounded and reasonable, and I think she's done very well with her practice and her career."

Says Nijman, "The thing that's most attractive about her as an attorney is that what you see is what you get. She's very honest, very straightforward, she's going to do her job in a nice way. There's an old saying that you get more with honey than with a sting, and she very much embodies that approach. She's able to be very successful in the way she practices law. Her personality with her legal skills makes a nice combination."

Gale has been deeply involved in the Chicago legal community. She currently serves as vice-chair of the Chicago Bar Association's environmental law committee. According to chair Allison Torrence, "She has been a very valuable part of the team, is always able to have connections, bring people in to speak, and has presented on a number of topics herself as a real expert in the field."

That expertise is linked to Gale's determination to continually deepen her knowledge of environmental law. When Nijman invited her to co-author some law textbooks for the Illinois Institute of Continuing Legal Education, Gale jumped at the opportunity to both learn more and share her extensive knowledge of environmental law with others.

McBride also highlights Gale's commitment to her practice. "She continues to work steadily in the field, and I think that's incredibly important in a field where science and technology and law interface."

Nijman agrees. "She's been terrific — her work here has become more and more key to our clients and our successes at the firm." ■