

COVER STORY

Young and the Restless

The individuals on our list of the Top 20 Under 40 do it all. From jump-starting the World Poker Tour into the national spotlight to fighting to keep ducks off the dinner table, these 30-somethings show no sign of folding.

After 13 years, you'd think that we would have perfected this process, but the pool of bright young lawyers who vie for inclusion on our annual Top 20 Under 40 list continues to amaze and overwhelm us.

During many long sessions to narrow the field, we looked at a hundred nominations submitted by their peers and partners. We vetted their accomplishments, their location and especially their age. Those nearing the end of eligibility for the list were given priority, since those still maneuvering through their early 30s have future years to shine.

As we dropped one and picked up another, we found we had come up with a pretty amazing hand.

Orly Degani of Sedgwick, Detert, Moran & Arnold LLP changed firms so she would have more time to protect the rights of animals.

Orly Degani, 37

Sedgwick, Detert, Moran & Arnold LLP

The first clue that Orly Degani loves what she does is her shortage of deep-pocketed clients. Some of her clients don't have pockets. Or pants, for that matter.

Though the appellate attorney and of-counsel to Sedgwick, Detert, Moran & Arnold LLP in Los Angeles has a dozen 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals wins under her belt, she has devoted much of her practice to keeping ducks from becoming dinner and kitties from being declawed.

Degani, 37, went to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's office last year to fight for a bill banning the force-feeding of ducks and geese for the production of foie gras, created by a painful procedure that fattens the fowls' livers, she says.

And Degani won, thanks to her ability not only to argue the legal viability of the bill but also to convince Sacramento lawmakers that the bill made good political and public relations sense, Sedgwick Detert partner Christina Imre says.

"Orly, for someone her age, has a very good sense of the practical and how to make it happen," Imre says. "It's like playing three-dimensional chess. She thinks on several levels at one time."

Though Degani always felt compassion for animals, she didn't become a vegetarian or an animal rights advocate until attending Stanford Law School in the early 1990s.

"I just started reading, on my own, some material about how animals are treated, especially farm animals, and what little protection they have in the law," she says. "And I was horrified."

Degani channeled that horror into positive action by founding the Los Angeles County Bar Association's animal issues committee, which hosts educational events, and Los Angeles Lawyers for Animals, which pushes for animal-safe legislation.



Photo by Robert Levins

"I just started reading, on my own, some material about how animals are treated, especially farm animals, and what little protection they have in the law and I was horrified," says Sedgwick, Detert, Moran & Arnold of counsel Orly Degani.

Each organization has swelled to 40 members in just a few years.

After serving as a federal prosecutor in the U.S. attorney's office in Los Angeles, Degani spent five years at civil appellate firm Horvitz & Levy in Encino.

She joined Sedgwick Detert last year because the firm allowed her more time for pro bono activities.

Calling the practice of declawing "extremely painful and cruel," Degani helped draft West Hollywood's 2003 ordinance banning declawing, in which veterinarians amputate the first digit of each animal's toe, she says.

Up next, she'll help defend the law in Los Angeles Superior Court, where the California Veterinary Medical Association filed a lawsuit March 7 arguing that the ordinance conflicts with state law.

Degani also is defending an appeal of a \$39,000 verdict a Sherman Oaks man got in Orange Superior Court for the "special value" of Shane, his beloved mutt, who allegedly perished after an overdose of drugs and unnecessary procedures at the hands of a veterinarian. *Bluestone v. Bergstrom*, G034466 (Cal. App. 4th Dist., filed Sept. 16, 2004).

While Degani's non-critter-related appellate practice at Sedgwick Detert pays the bills, a higher calling drives her to work for the health and safety of animals.

"Animals don't have any money. You really have to do it because you're committed to doing something good for them, to improving their situation," she says.

— Tina Spee