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Crowell IP Dynamo Rea Leaves Legacy of Women Leaders at Firm (1)

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- **Terry Rea leaves Big Law after four decades of leadership**
- **Her proteges at firm defy the norm in male-dominated specialty**

When Terry Stanek Rea began practicing law in Michigan in 1980, there were roughly 200 patent attorneys in the state. She was one of only three women.

As the former vice chair of Crowell & Moring's intellectual property group and a guiding force in the practice, especially to other women lawyers, Rea bucked that male-dominated norm by hiring and mentoring female IP partners. The one-time acting director of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office now leaves behind more women IP leaders in the firm's practice group than were working throughout Michigan when she got her start.

Crowell outperformed nearly all of the 100 firms that practice the most before the Patent Trial and Appeal Board, according to a 2021 [study](#) by the tribunal's bar association. The average percentage of women appearing in PTAB cases for such firms is 13% but for Crowell the number was 42%.



Terry Stanek Rea
Photographer: Melissa Lyttle/Bloomberg

Rea's team includes [Debbie Yellin](#), who joined the firm with Rea in 2008; [Anne Li](#), who came to Crowell from a boutique firm in 2015 and co-chairs the patents practice group; and [Shannon Lentz](#), who started working at Crowell in 2008 and became partner last year. Rea calls the team, which specializes in life sciences cases, "techno geeks."

She is leaving Big Law after nearly 40 years—interrupted only by 2 1/2 years in upper management at the US Patent and Trademark Office—to open Rea Consulting LLC, an IP advisory firm.

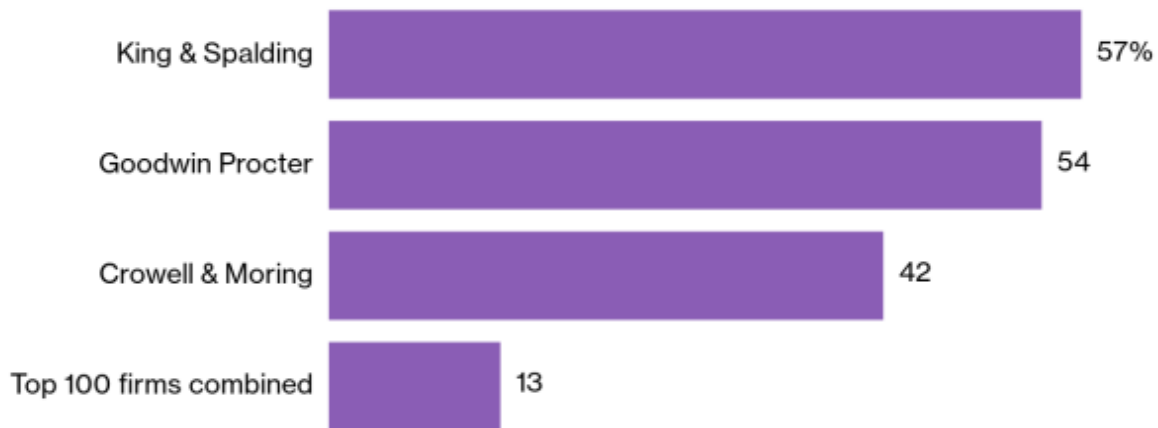
"I went to every meeting I could," she said of her early days of practice. There was never a line for the ladies' room, she added.

Patent law is less male dominated than it was at the start of Rea's career, but still only 26.6% of [patent lawyers](#) are women as compared to 38% of all lawyers [according](#) to the American Bar Association. Rea and several of her proteges at Crowell said the under-representation of women in engineering, math, and sciences has translated to a

persistent gender disparity in patent law, where a technical degree and background are not just highly valued but a general requirement for practicing before the PTO.

Top High-Volume Firms for Share of Women's PTAB Appearances

Percentage of attorney appearances by women in 2021, by law firm



Source: PTAB Bar Association
Note: Data limited to top 100 firms making the most appearances before the Patent Trial and Appeal Board in 2021.

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Rea is a long time practitioner before the board. She's served as a PTO's Patent Trial and Appeal Board judge and last year was named president of the PTAB Bar Association. She's separately led the American Intellectual Property Law Association and served in top PTO leadership roles. She received an undergraduate degree from the University of Michigan's College of Pharmacy in 1976, one year before starting at Wayne State University Law School.

In an interview before her departure, Rea said she understood when she was coming up that she was a "token female" but today that's no longer true.

She recalls a time when some of the men she worked for would "open the door and say, 'This is the best person for your case'" while others were "eager not to ruffle anyone's feathers." When there were missed opportunities to get business, she said she would find "backdoor ways to let the client know what I was capable of in the future."

"I figure everyone sees opportunities flit by," Rea said, "but I had grit and learned from them."

Now, as a senior attorney working with new crops of patent lawyers, she's tried to demystify business development and make client connections the norm.

"Men don't tend to discuss how to bring in a new client," she said, adding that transparency about that development process "helps women and diverse attorneys."

'Circle of Trust'

Rea said she didn't set out to create opportunities for women patent attorneys at Crowell—just top-rated attorneys.

"I wouldn't say I had a bias," Rea said of hiring women as patent lawyer during her tenure. "It was frankly secondary in my mind, but people knew I had a primarily female team and everyone was fine with it; they were just good attorneys."



Debbie H. Yellin
Photographer: Melissa

Those attorneys—Yellin and Lentz in Crowell’s Washington office and Li, who’s based in New York—say they gravitated to Rea because there was something exceptional about the way she advocated for them at the firm.

“Here was a role model—a woman who was out there when women were very uncommon in the field,” said Yellin, who has a degree in public health to go with her law degree. “She hired me in December 2000 and even from the start she was giving me opportunities with clients—even as a baby attorney.”

Li, who joined Crowell in 2015 after working as an epidemiologist, said one of Rea’s connections marked a pivotal point in her career. Li was working on pre-litigation strategy for a client of Rea’s and had briefed her on the issues. The two attorneys then joined a conference call with the client. Li recalls Rea saying, ““Hey, it’s me, Terry, and I’m on the line with Anne Li, and *she’s* going to be the one who’s going to win for you.””

“I’d finally broken into her circle of trust and got to work on this big thing with her as she was leading Crowell,” Li said. “It’s incredible to be in her light, and she’s advocating for you in ways you don’t understand.”

Lentz joined the firm while in law school in 2008 with a background in molecular biology and genetics and experience working at the Naval Medical Research Center. She made partner in 2023, and said the “idea of getting into her circle of trust has been in my mind since the day I met her.”

Lentz contrasted her career with Rea, as well as Yellin and Li. “I’ve only ever been at Crowell,” she said. “I’ve only ever been surrounded by women.”

“I feel so sheltered from what some women have had to go through,” she said, pointing to both female and male partners at Crowell who she said advocated forcefully for her advancement and smoothed out what may have been a rockier road for earlier generations of women patent attorneys.

“There are all these women coming behind me who hopefully will never have to experience this BS of being judged,” Lentz said.

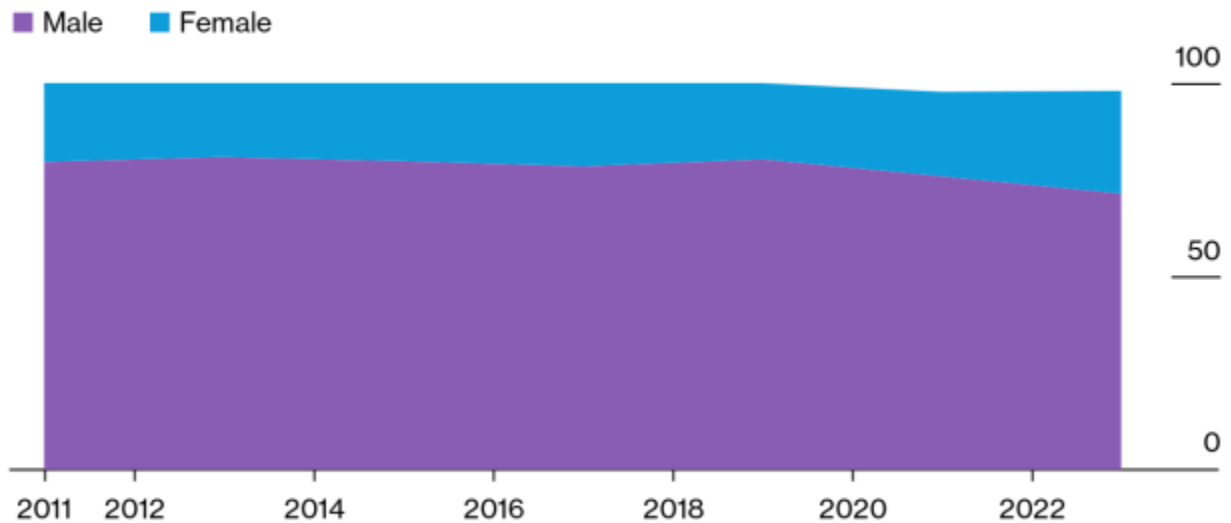


Anne Li
Photographer: Melissa



Shannon Lentz
Photographer: Melissa Lyttle/Bloomberg

Women Made Up a Quarter of IP Lawyers for the First Time in 2023



Source: American Intellectual Property Law Association survey data

Note: Figures may not sum to 100 because some survey respondents declined to specify

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Work-Life Balance

Another feature of Rea's leadership, according to her colleagues, is that having a family hasn't derailed career trajectories at Crowell.

"I was very pregnant and sitting in her office," Lentz recalled, adding that Rea brought up her own maternity leave where she left for just a few weeks "and was right back." But that wasn't the expectation for Lentz. She said she was able to take 18 weeks off without interruptions in the form of calls or emails about work.

"As intense as she is about the work, she's always been a softie," Lentz said.

"Terry made a lot of sacrifices, and I think that was impressive," said [Elaine Spector](#), a partner with the Virginia patent law firm Harrity & Harrity, who overlapped with Rea as an associate at a patent law boutique where Rea worked before Crowell.

Spector said Crowell's track record regarding women IP lawyers is significant, and that other large firms with strong IP practices including Perkins Coie and Fish & Richardson also deserve credit for advancing both women and other diverse attorneys.

"We're seeing more women in the field, and it's a wonderful trend," said Spector, whose firm launched a program called Patent Pathways to advance Black women lawyers as patent practitioners. "It's been great to see someone like Terry lift people up like that."

Looking Ahead

Chris Potts, chief executive and co-founder of Monarch Therapeutics Inc., a cell therapy biotech company focused on the treatment of solid tumors, said he has worked with Crowell's IP team on cases ranging from trade secrets to patent and trademark matters.

"They are really second to none in expertise in the type of work I've done with them, which is highly technically complex work in intellectual property," Potts said.

Crowell has other practice groups that feature women in leadership roles. Laura Lydigsen, who now leads Crowell's larger intellectual property department, came to the firm when it merged with Chicago-based Brinks Gilson & Lione in 2021. She said the difference in terms of gender at the two firms was stark.



Laura Lydigsen
Photographer: Melissa Lyttle/Bloomberg

In the IP department, Crowell has 109 attorneys, 30% of whom are women. Within the smaller biotech group, 10 of the 19 lawyers are women and 71% of the group's partners are women.

For Lydigsen that contrasted mightily with her previous experience at Brinks.

"By the time we combined there were only two women partners left in the patents group," said Lydigsen, who also served on the firm's board.

"I was a lone woman in a sea of men, and not because the IP practice wasn't welcoming to women, but women face struggles generally because of the hours component and because we're giving birth in the years that" are key to advancement, she said.

Even though the combined firm is now ahead of many competitors, Lydigsen said, Crowell can't rest on its laurels. She pointed to programs aimed at boosting gender and racial diversity, and said the firm is "adamant" about employees taking advantage of generous leave policies, contrasting that with firms where she said leave or a reduced schedule could hurt career development.

"It's something we need to be thinking" about, she said. "I don't think it's self-sustaining."

(Updates in third paragraph to add information about law firms and in 25th paragraph to clarify a quote about Rea's parental leave. A previous version of this article corrected several dates of when lawyers joined Crowell.)

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