MVP: King & Spalding's Tracie Renfroe

Law360 (December 11, 2018, 1:29 PM EST) -- Tracie Renfroe, partner at King & Spalding, steered a ConocoPhillips affiliate toward a $380 million win and Chevron away from billion-dollar losses in disputes over Ecuador's natural resources, making her one of Law360's 2018 Environmental MVPs.

HER BIGGEST ACCOMPLISHMENT IN THE PAST YEAR:
Renfroe's representation of ConocoPhillips unit Burlington Resources enabled it to enforce a $380 million arbitration award against Ecuador after it seized Burlington's investments in two oil exploration blocks and spurred a dispute that ultimately landed before a tribunal at the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes, a World Bank platform for state-investor conflicts.

"That's a career highlight for me," Renfroe said. "It was an opportunity to take my primarily U.S. domestic environmental litigation practice to a global international arbitration setting, and convince a tribunal that knew very little about environmental issues that the science proved my client was right."

Tracie Renfroe
King & Spalding

Renfroe said she believed in taking "the fear out of the issue" of climate change while defending her clients from assertions of liability against Big Oil corporations.

"If I can help the jury trust the science, I can often help them trust my client," she said, speaking broadly of trials in which she successfully represented energy companies accused of harming the environment.

OTHER NOTABLE CASES:
More recently, Renfroe persuaded a Hague tribunal in August to declare as fraudulent a $9.5 billion fine imposed by Ecuador against Chevron, for its predecessor's alleged pollution of the Amazon.

"I'm really proud of those outcomes," she said, referring to both cases against Ecuador in which she

represented major energy companies.

Back in the U.S., Renfroe helped secure the dismissal in July of a lawsuit by New York state seeking to hold oil giants like her client, ConocoPhillips, accountable for climate change's worsening conditions. A similar lawsuit brought by Oakland and San Francisco was tossed in June after ConocoPhillips and others removed the case to federal court in October 2017.

WHY SHE'S AN ENVIRONMENTAL ATTORNEY:
Renfroe said her lack of formal education in environmental science conversely made her an asset among environmental litigators, sparked by her interest in the legal issues and her ability to explain it to other beginners.

"I have an economics degree from my undergrad, and I don't consider myself as having a strong science background," Renfroe said. "But I have always been interested in the science issues that come with environmental litigation... You are going back to science class, or the science lab, literally in every lawsuit. "

Renfroe encouraged attorneys just starting their careers not to be intimidated if they don't have subject matter expertise.

"Follow your passion, and trust your instinct," she said. "If you looked at my undergraduate school record, I had no business going into the environmental field. I had no engineering degree, no science degree. That might have disqualified me in the eyes of many people."

She said this lack of a formal background in science made her more relatable to jury members presiding over fact-heavy cases, in which many may feel overwhelmed.

"Don't disqualify yourself if you have a passion or interest," she said. "Just dive into it and pursue it."

HER PROUDEST MOMENT:
Renfroe, having had a long career in trials and environmental litigation, found it difficult to boil it down to one moment. But she offered some insight into the clients she's been proudest to represent.

"I'm very proud to represent, frankly, Corporate America," she said. "I've represented a lot of major companies. I like to get to know them, and then help the jury understand and humanize them."

— As told to Michelle Bocanegra

Law360's MVPs are attorneys who have distinguished themselves from their peers over the past year through high-stakes litigation, record-breaking deals and complex global matters. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2018 MVP winners after reviewing nearly 1,000 submissions.