

Second Act

How one piece of advice took Riemann from the lab to the law.

Exactly 20 years ago, life looked very different for **Denise Riemann, BS '75 and JD '00**. With a doctorate in cell biology, she'd built a booming career as a scientist in the early days of in vitro fertilization. From 1983 to 1996, she helped people grow their families in Houston, Denver, and Miami, skillfully running her beloved lab while raising her young daughter. Her choices were made, her course set.

Then everything changed.

"In some ways, it's a happy story. In some ways, it's a tragic story. I had a failing marriage, and there was a lot of trouble there," Riemann said. "One of the safest places for me was back home."

Relocating from Florida to her hometown near Topeka was the right move; Riemann could feel it in her gut. But coming home meant starting over. Fertility clinics just weren't as abundant as they are today.

Without a grand plan for her next career, Riemann responded to a two-line ad — a "lucky accident" that led her to **Bill Griffin, '73**, Kansas Chapter 13 trustee. The two clicked immediately. He called her "the doctor," a nod to her PhD. She dubbed him "the boss."

Riemann would serve as a bankruptcy case analyst with Griffin for five years.

"She's off-the-charts smart, practical, and realistic. There was nothing she wouldn't do, and nothing she couldn't learn to do," Griffin said. "Everyone really enjoyed her, and she was a great resource for us."

Of course, the job had absolutely nothing to do with Riemann's old profession. But it had everything to do with her future one.

"I had been there for not quite six months," she said. "Bill told me I could work for him forever if I wanted, but I wouldn't have much chance for working my way up. He suggested that with my background, I consider going to law school at Washburn Law and look into patent law."

She was 44 years old, a scientist for more than half her life. The proposition of becoming a lawyer at that point was daunting, unexpected, and as it turns out, perfect for the research-minded Riemann.

"It would have never occurred to me to go to law school. It was really purely on his advice," she said. "But once I got there, I really loved it."

Driven by that passion, Riemann "never did anything else but work or study" for three solid years. Somehow, while logging 40 hours weekly with Griffin and serving as an adjunct biology professor at Washburn, plus guiding her daughter through high school, she managed to stay in the top 10 of her class. After six demanding semesters, an intensive four-month intro to patent law with Professor James Wadley, and roughly 6,000 hours at her job, she graduated with honors in December 2000. The scientist had officially become a lawyer.

"He suggested that with my background, I consider going to law school at Washburn Law and look into patent law. It would have never occurred to me to go to law school. It was really purely on his advice. But once I got there, I really loved it."

Making good on Griffin's vision, she was ready to take on intellectual property law — copyrights, trademarks, patents, and the like.

"When I took the patent bar, I'm guessing there were about 80 people in the room, and fewer than five of us were women," she said. "I don't dwell on that much; it's sort of been the story of my life. I've always been in a man's field, even when I was in the laboratory."

Unfazed, Riemann conquered the patent bar — and with her daughter off at college — she made another fresh start. She

didn't know a single person on the East Coast. She'd never even visited. But in a leap of faith, she signed on as intellectual property counsel with Apogent Technologies in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Eventually, the group joined Thermo Fisher Scientific in Waltham, Massachusetts. Manufacturing laboratory products — and consumer items such as the Nalgene water bottle — the company boasts approximately 50,000 employees worldwide and \$17 billion in revenues.

As lead IP attorney for specialty diagnostics and consumer products, Riemann protects the company's creations in a host of areas — from anatomic pathology to microbiology to transplant diagnostics. Simply put? Her work helps medical staff diagnose and treat diseases earlier, faster, and better. As a former lab dweller, she's especially qualified for the gig.

"I'm learning a lot about technologies and the evolving law in these fields as well," she said.

"I had to learn a lot as I went. But I really love science, and I was familiar with the products and love these companies. So it's been a perfect fit for me, I think."

Riemann braved an unconventional path — law school at 44, a second career at 48.

Now, 20 fulfilling years later, she's relishing her role, and soaking up life as grandmother to "the most wonderful child on the planet." To top it all off, she was named a 2015 Corporate IP Star by Managing Intellectual Property magazine. Not bad for a second act.

"Personally, I'd like to work the rest of my life," she said. "It's really satisfying to work for these businesses and know that the products are making a difference in people's lives."

