

Thinking Outside the Box

Leslie A. Gordon

[Cristina Rubke](#), a second-year associate at San Francisco's Shartsis Friese, works on the firm's biggest case, representing minority members of a charitable organization that alleges Princeton University misused a large gift in 1961.

Rubke puts in long hours, often toiling away in the office long past dinner. She recently bought her own home and has the pressures of both billable hours and a mortgage, but she talks about these things with a verve typical of young professionals. She sounds like your average law firm associate—and she is, which is what makes her impressive.

Rubke was born with arthrogryposis multiplex congenita, an exceptionally rare (she's met only one other person with the condition and typically has to spell it for doctors) and severe condition in which muscles fail to develop in the womb. As a result, Rubke has no use of her arms or legs and relies on a chin-controlled wheelchair and a staff of six attendants. A 2004 graduate of Santa Clara University's School of Law, Rubke passed the bar exam on the first try in the standard time allotted. ("I never want to be in tests longer than I have to," explains Rubke, who types with a pen that she holds between her teeth.)

Rubke is disarmingly humble about her accomplishments, explaining, for example, that she chose to go to law school primarily because "I couldn't rely on filing skills, so I needed to get the best education I could." So far, she says, she hasn't experienced discrimination in the profession. "Sometimes people are surprised that I'm a lawyer because I'm pretty small and I look young. But people don't treat me differently, which is good."

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