

‘Not Going Away’: A Star Greenberg Traurig Litigator Lost Her Voice. AI Brought It Back

January 24, 2024

When Lori Cohen was a young girl, she had one goal in life: to become the female version of Atticus Finch.

While many see their ambitious childhood dreams fall by the wayside, Cohen made hers come true. Over the course of three decades, the last two of which have been with Greenberg Traurig, Cohen made a name for herself as a “Trial Wizard,” gaining national recognition and amassing an impressive record of 58 defense verdicts in complex litigations involving pharmaceuticals, medical devices, health care and products liability.

She built a lauded career on the ability to speak, advocate and persuade.

Then, without warning, Cohen woke up one morning in March 2022, turned to speak to her dog Lightning—and nothing came out. And it hasn’t since.

To date, no medical professional has seen a case like Cohen’s, but she has never given up hope. Her journey has been an uncharted one, full of creative solutions, novel technologies and a “try anything” mentality. It’s also one for which she eschews pity.

“I am not going away,” she states confidently, adding, in her typically effusive style, “We do not want to waste a crisis!”



Courtesy photos

Lori Cohen, left, and Gerard Buitrago, right, with Greenberg Traurig.

Parallel Paths Forward

When Cohen lost her voice, she and her husband started pounding the medical pavement, reaching out first to local medical specialists, and then casting their net globally. They have yet to find an explanation or a cure.

Nevertheless, Cohen has continued to pursue all avenues, no matter how far-fetched they may sound. Today, nearly two years later, her mantra remains the same—she’ll try anything, do anything and go anywhere to get her voice back.

“I have learned so much about people who have lost the ability to speak,” Cohen said. “I am hopeful that I can help those who can’t help themselves, either because they do not know

how to navigate the systems or do not have access to the technology. I hope and intend to take what I have learned through my journey and find the best ways to pay it forward to those who may need my help.”

While Cohen remained ever-optimistic, she quickly realized that she needed another option if she was to continue advocating for her clients and performing her duties at Greenberg Traurig, where she remains vice chair of the firm, its head of litigation and an active member of the executive committee.

“The practice of law is a great and meaningful profession and not one to be taken for granted. Even after my thirty-three years of practicing law, I truly love it and am eminently proud of being a lawyer,” Cohen said. “I especially love and thrive on being a trial lawyer, which is all I ever wanted to be or do growing up. It is because of these deep sentiments that I am fighting so hard to stay in this practice and to return to court and trials rather than giving up, which I have no intention of doing.”

That meant that, as Cohen sought out every medical cure possible, she also sought out every technological solution that had the potential to bring her voice back. Cohen turned to Gerard Buitrago, litigation support trial consultant at Greenberg Traurig, and Cohen’s long-time friend, colleague and “secret weapon” with whom she’d worked on trials for more than 20 years, to help find the best answer.

First, Cohen found a text-to-speech app called Speech Assistant, which she still uses today for casual, day-to-day communications, but the audio it generates sounds robotic and can only produce short responses on the go—not a suitable solution for someone who wanted to get back to arguing in court. Next came experimen-



Photo: J. Albert Diaz/ALM

Greenberg Traurig office, in West Palm Beach.

tation with tools that allow users to input longer text, adding punctuation for basic intonation, and to select a preset voice that was as close as possible to Cohen’s.

These were better options, but it still wasn’t Cohen.

Then the pair discovered Eleven Labs, the generative AI voice generation company that’s perhaps best known for its use in entertainment settings. That’s when AI Lori, who Cohen has affectionately named Lola, was born.

Her Name Was Lola

Unlike other technologies Buitrago and Cohen had tried, Eleven Labs for the first time presented the team with the possibility of creating an AI voice that actually sounded like Cohen and that could be used for longer presentations and courtroom work.

Based on just a couple minutes of past recordings of Cohen speaking, Buitrago was able to use Eleven Labs to produce an output that sounded exactly like Cohen, bringing the sound of her voice back to the world for the first time in months.

Given Cohen’s long and prolific career of presenting, giving interviews and arguing in court, in addition to advances in courtroom technology that include the recording of trials

and arguments, it wasn't hard for Buitrago to find more input to feed into Eleven Labs. With Greenberg Traurig's help, he was able to pull together years' worth of pre-recorded material to further develop Lola.

With the cleanest audio they could find, Cohen and Buitrago started piecing together short clips to create longer Lola outputs, adjusting the speed, tenor of speech, speaking flow and level of enunciation to match Cohen's natural speech patterns. They then paired it with the PowerPoint slides Cohen is known for in her court appearances.

Once Cohen's voice was recreated in Eleven Labs, it was easy to adjust it for use in different settings, such as a casual presentation or a formal argument to a judge, Buitrago explained. One lesson he said he quickly learned, though, was how important it was to add extra punctuation like commas and exclamation points to guide the AI voice on where to pause, how effusive to be and more. As a result, the Lola output from Eleven Labs has improved over time, becoming better at intonation and more closely mimicking Cohen's typical way of speaking.

Now, even with Cohen being a perfectionist—as many attorneys are—a five-minute clip of Lola that sounds nearly identical to Cohen's natural delivery can be finalized in roughly 20 to 30 minutes, Buitrago estimated.

The remaining hurdle for Cohen and Buitrago is to be able to use Cohen's AI voice on the fly. As of now, there's no integration between Eleven Labs and any speech-to-text app, meaning that Cohen is still left with the more robotic voice via on-the-spot typing if she's answering questions or communicating in real time. The pair remains optimistic, though, that this hurdle will soon be solved.

'She Has Once Again Found Her Voice'

The biggest test of the newfound AI solution came when Cohen first started using her new AI voice in court. The first argument took place in the fall of 2023 before Judge Richard Licht, Rhode Island Superior Court Associate Justice, before whom Cohen had appeared many times as lead defense counsel in a large docket of hernia mesh cases.

Though Licht did not hesitate to grant Cohen's request to use her AI voice to argue a motion once he knew his court stenographer was comfortable with it, he was also quick to note that the circumstances would not make him rule in her favor or stop him from treating her like any other attorney in his courtroom.

"I approved it and she came in, she argued a couple of the motions. I interrupted her with questions, and she was able to type in the answers and speak," he said. While initially he said he questioned in his mind if it was fair to interrupt Cohen, he explained, "I treated her the way I would have treated her had she not had [the AI voice]. And I did it that way because I have such respect for her. She's so capable that I knew she could handle it. And she handled it perfectly."

Jonathan Orent, member attorney at Motley Rice, who has frequently appeared as opposing counsel against Cohen in the product liability cases before Judge Licht, equally supported Cohen's novel technology approach. "I have litigated against Lori for years," he noted. "With her new technology she has once again found her voice. She is every bit as formidable now as she was before."

Cohen said she always gives any court and opposing counsel advance notice of the technology she uses, and to date no one has objected. In fact, Cohen noted that they've been overwhelmingly receptive and kind. And

because most courtrooms are now equipped to present PowerPoints and audio, Buitrago reported that there have not been technical hurdles yet in that regard.

In speaking to several of Cohen's colleagues, including Licht, many noted that the professional bar would suffer a huge loss if Cohen could no longer argue. That's why Licht said he's open to seeing wider use of solutions like hers in his courtroom going forward. "Would the technology work with someone that isn't as able as Lori? I don't know. But I would certainly be willing to try it with anyone based on my experience with her," he said.

By all indications, Cohen's circumstances haven't slowed her down—except maybe in her natural speed of speaking, which has universally been described as very fast. Still, until she regains her natural voice, being able to participate in a full trial with the help of AI remains the goal.

"There is too much to be done still at my firm, with my clients and in my industry," Cohen explained. "Being a mentor and inspiration for those coming behind me and those on my team or in my firm is of critical value and importance. I have won awards for being a trailblazer and there is much more to do still. As one of the early first chair female trial attorneys in my products liability, medical device/pharmaceutical and bet-the-company/mass torts specialty areas, there is more to teach, more to do, more to mentor and more trails to blaze."

To get there, Cohen has the full support of both her firm and her clients. "Lori's innovative journey to find a new way forward in the practice of law has been a joy to support and we will continue to assist her in all her efforts," said Richard Rosenbaum, executive chairman of Greenberg Traurig. "Her resil-

ience and drive in this process, coupled with the ingenuity of her solutions to challenges, exhibit a strength of character that many aspire to, and few achieve."

One of Cohen's clients, Shari Mulrooney Wollman, vice president and assistant general counsel at Mattel Inc., echoed those sentiments, and was confident that others in the industry would embrace Cohen's solution to the loss of her voice. "Lori is a formidable trial attorney at the top of the profession," she said. "We have great confidence that judges and juries throughout the country will share our respect for her refusal to let her challenges define or limit her in any way. It has also been inspiring to see AI technology redefine what it means to give voice to disability."

Meanwhile, Buitrago continues to investigate every new product that is released in the ever-changing AI market, in the constant pursuit of making Cohen's AI presence in the courtroom even stronger.

A True 'Street Fighter' and Mentor, Now and Always

Beyond her well-known trial skills, Cohen has also made a name for herself as a strong mentor over the course of her career, and it's a role she continues to embrace, both in the legal industry and beyond.

When asked what she wants people to know about her story, in addition to the focus on her trial work, Cohen emphasized that it is not one of pity, but one of hope, optimism and fight. She also noted that, while hers is a story about technology, it's also a story about Big Law having a huge heart.

It's easy to see why Cohen feels that way when you read the testimonials of many of her colleagues at Greenberg Traurig, where themes of mentorship and leadership were raised time

and again. “Lori is the rare combination of consummate trial lawyer, exceptional leader, devoted mentor and great friend that her clients, colleagues, Greenberg Traurig and I find essential to our success,” said firm CEO Brian Duffy. “Her creative approach to case strategy, acumen in managing the most complex and voluminous litigation, and many courtroom victories, are legend. She is a leader that has helped to advance the careers of numerous talented, diverse litigators at our firm and beyond. Considering all that she has achieved, I have no doubt that she will continue to be a leading light in the legal profession.”

Similarly, Ernest Greer, president of Greenberg Traurig, noted that he was “not surprised that she has addressed this recent challenge with the same unfailing grit, tenacity, and creativity for which she is renowned as a litigator and leader in law.” He added that since Cohen has “always been an inspiration to her colleagues and peers for her dedication to the legal profession, a champion for diversity, and a mentor to young attorneys, this triumph illustrates yet another way that Lori is an example to emulate.”

Even if Cohen were to regain her speaking voice tomorrow, she said that, while she would of course be thrilled, she would continue to fight to help people who need technology assistance to speak. Ever the optimist, Cohen was quick to point out that she is very lucky to have hands that can still type, when so many people without voices do not, and she wants to advocate for them. “There is work to be done and I intend to do it even if I get cured,” she said.

That tenacity comes as no surprise to those who have come up in the profession under

Cohen’s tutelage. Marcella Ducca, a shareholder in Greenberg Traurig’s Atlanta office, who was herself mentored by Cohen in her earlier years, called Cohen “a street fighter [who] approaches her current medical challenges with the same zeal that she does in taking on every new case and battling every opponent.”

The overwhelming support of the firm, which Cohen admitted was beyond her expectations, has also given life to the idea of teamwork, which is oft-touted but less frequently embodied in large organizations.

“We feel that now, more so than ever, we have in Lori someone we want to make proud, but also someone to admire who is continuing to work exceptionally hard in the middle of challenging circumstances,” Ducca said. “As we navigate them, Greenberg Traurig has been incredibly supportive—not just of Lori, but of the team that Lori has created. We often talk about the ‘GT family’ and I truly never understood that phrase until now.”

While Cohen remains committed to getting back into trial soon, she has also refused to let herself be sidelined in her other life passions—like seeing the Rolling Stones in concert (she’s up to 145 live shows and counting). “Technology and AI is instrumental right now in helping me to lead my life fully and vigorously and to practice law in the same ways,” she concluded. “I am living life in the ‘front row’ as always.”

Lori Cohen and Gerard Buitrago will be honored with ALM’s first-ever Outstanding Achievement in Legal Technology Award as part of the Legalweek Leaders in Tech Law Awards ceremony on Monday, Jan. 29, 2024, during Legalweek 2024.