

Cortell Featured by Super Lawyers: ‘You Will Not Outwork Her’

September 21, 2026

RELATED PRACTICES Appellate and Supreme Court

Haynes Boone Senior Counsel [Nina Cortell](#) was featured in the 2026 Texas *Super Lawyers* magazine in a deeply personal profile tracing the values that have shaped her legal career. From her parents’ escape from Nazi persecution and their belief in giving back, to Cortell’s decision to pursue law at a time when women faced significant barriers entering the profession, the feature explores the experiences that helped define her approach to leadership and advocacy.

Read an excerpt below and the full feature from *Super Lawyers* [here](#).

Nina Cortell entered the Supreme Court of Texas on a March morning in 2003, ready to continue the fight in a case that would increase funding for Texas public schools.

At the time, school districts were allowed to levy local property taxes, up to a cap, to fund their maintenance and operations costs. Nearly half of the districts — representing about 60% of the public school students — were taxing at the \$1.50 statutory cap. Roughly two-thirds — or 80% of the student population — were taxing at, or within, 5 cents of the cap. The districts argued that state-mandated standards, a lack of state financial support, demographic trends and unfunded mandates had forced them to tax at that level — depriving them of meaningful discretion over their tax rate and thereby transforming these local taxes into a de facto unconstitutional state property tax. ...

“I know this is not easy for this court, but I do want to share with you some Jewish wisdom, if I might, from Pirkei Avot,” she told the justices. “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from trying.” The schoolchildren of this state require this court’s attention.”

Two months later, the court agreed with Cortell’s position and reinstated the case for trial. And two years after that, Cortell’s firm was again arguing before the state Supreme Court. The court agreed with her again, ruling that school-related property taxes had essentially become an unconstitutional state property tax. And following this ruling, the Legislature created new funding streams that increased state financial support for the maintenance and operations of Texas’ school districts, infusing into the system additional financial capacity in excess of \$2 billion. ...

To this day, Cortell is tickled to have cited the Pirkei Avot, an ancient Jewish text, in the school finance case.

Like many German-Jewish immigrants who escaped but lost family in the Holocaust, Cortell’s parents spoke little of their experience as she grew up. Only later would they share the details about how her maternal grandparents had fled to France after Germany’s invasion of Luxembourg — where they hid until they were captured by Nazis in May 1944, just before D-Day, and were murdered at Auschwitz. ...

Cortell's parents instilled in their two daughters a great love for the United States as well as a sense of humanitarianism. As a liberal arts major at the University of Texas at Austin looking to further her education, Cortell considered several public service paths — education, social work and law.

"I was taught that it is our responsibility to give back and make the world a better place," Cortell says. "You want to leave the world in a better place than you found it."

As she considered where her future might lead, Cortell sat in on a first-year property law class taught by esteemed professor Stanley Johanson, who presented the students with a challenge. "The scenario was that a meteorite had fallen onto some farmland. Who was entitled to keep the meteorite — the person who found it, or the person who owned the land?" Cortell says. "I was hooked. And I knew within weeks of starting law school that I was where I needed to be."

As part of a generation in which women were 10% to 15% of law school graduates, Cortell, now 74, encountered a difficult climate. "There was a reluctance by firms to hire women," she recalls. "While I've always been indebted to Haynes Boone for many things, one is having the courage and vision to hire a woman." ...

In the late '80s, about the time Texas made the practice a certified specialty, Haynes Boone's George Bramblett lobbied the firm to launch an appellate group. Cortell credits the charismatic litigator with helping shape her career, and the group now has two dozen lawyers.

"She's an appellate pioneer in the state of Texas," says firm partner Ben Mesches, who first met Cortell when he was a summer associate in 2000. "She understood there was a certain skillset

that could be brought to [this practice]. There were few jurisdictions in the U.S. where there were true appellate specialists. This was the beginning."

Anne Johnson, who spent 26 years at Haynes Boone and is now head of the U.S. appellate team for Norton Rose Fulbright in Dallas, was immediately assigned to Cortell out of law school in 1995.

"Nina really raised me as a lawyer," she says. "I still draw on the leadership principles she employed and think about things she did to attract and retain talent. She's an extraordinarily talented lawyer, a team player and a team builder. It's rare to see all those skills in one person." ...

Opponents respect her. "She's a fierce competitor," says Johnson. "You do not want to be on the other side of Nina Cortell. She likes to win."

She adds: "You will not outwork her. Nobody will. She was never one of those leaders who let the minions do the work. She was always deep in the weeds, involved in everything." ...

Around the same time, as part of a 30th anniversary law school reunion, Cortell and other female graduates discussed how to help move the needle forward for their modern counterparts. Thus began several years of intense planning and evaluation culminating in the 2009 opening of the Center for Women in Law at the University of Texas' School of Law in Austin.

Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who had recently retired, attended the center's inaugural launch and served as keynote speaker. "I got to be with her in a small group setting," Cortell says. "She was so inspiring. I'll never forget it."