

DEBORAH LEVI, 34, LAWYER, MUSICIAN

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Deborah L. Levi, a lawyer, musician, and Francophile, died of breast cancer Friday at her home in Somerville. She was 34.

As an attorney with Ropes & Gray in Boston, Ms. Levi helped defend Mayor Thomas M. Menino against a lawsuit filed by the South Boston Betterment Trust. The suit, which alleged Menino reneged on a deal giving the trust broad powers over development along the South Boston Waterfront, was thrown out in a strongly worded decision by a Superior Court judge last year. It awaits review next month by the state Supreme Judicial Court. Her work on the case impressed Menino, and the mayor called the family after he learned she was ill to offer condolences.

Raised in Bethesda, Md., where her mother cooked French meals, Ms. Levi developed an early and enduring fascination with France. As a 14-year-old child, she told her mother, "I'm not going to camp anymore. I'm going to France." After working odd jobs to earn enough money to pay the difference between the cost of summer camp and a trip to France, she did.

Ms. Levi graduated magna cum laude from Harvard University in 1990 and went on to earn a master's degree in French history and literature from Emory University. In order to complete her degree, Ms. Levi traveled to Paris, where she met Francoise Giguel at an AIDS march. "She had an 18th-century vocabulary," said Giguel. "It was charming to hear her use expressions we don't use anymore." They were married in 1996.

Ms. Levi was diagnosed with breast cancer in the early 1990s, and it was then that she began teaching herself guitar. A violinist, singer, and songwriter, music provided an outlet for Ms. Levi's frustrations and emotions during her illness. In a song about being a breast cancer patient, Ms. Levi wrote, "Give it to me straight, man. Tell me the worst that it can be. I can take the worst, so just tell me."

"She was very matter-of-fact about it, and that made everyone else matter-of-fact about it," said Paul Kafka-Gibbons, a close friend of Ms. Levi's, referring not only to how she dealt with breast cancer, but with most issues.

Her family remembers stories of numerous co-workers who consulted Ms. Levi about personal issues, eager for her frank and open attitude.

While in graduate school, Ms. Levi decided that a life in academia was not for her. Opting for a career in which she could interact with and help people, Ms. Levi enrolled at New York University School of Law, finishing in 1997. She served as an editor of the school's Law Review.

In addition to her wife, Ms. Levi leaves her parents, David and Shelley of Bethesda; a sister, Joanna of Los Angeles; and grandparents, Don and Charlotte Palay of Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

A funeral will be held Tuesday at 1 p.m. in Levine Chapel in Brookline.