

Rising Star: Sanford Heisler's Alexandra Harwin

Law360, New York (July 16, 2017, 3:02 PM EDT) -- Sanford Heisler Sharp LLP's Alexandra Harwin scored a favorable settlement for workers in a gender bias suit against Swiss pharmaceutical giant Novartis AG and is currently pursuing high-profile sex discrimination claims on behalf of female attorneys against BigLaw powerhouses Proskauer Rose LLP and Chadbourne & Parke LLP, making her one of five employment attorneys under 40 recognized by Law360 as Rising Stars.

WHAT MOTIVATES HER TO PRACTICE EMPLOYMENT LAW:

Harwin, a 2011 graduate of Yale Law School, joined Sanford Heisler in January 2015 after a stint practicing family law because she says the firm offered her an opportunity to work on cases that could have a broad social impact, whether they be individual matters or class actions.

While she didn't initially intend to practice employment law, she has come to realize that the practice allows her to do work that is "noteworthy both for individual clients and society at large," adding that discrimination and retaliation matters "are cases that get me excited to get up in the morning and spend my days on."

Those cases have included her work pursuing gender bias claims against Proskauer and Chadbourne & Parke — cases she describes as "groundbreaking" since the firms are asserting that their partners are not entitled to the protection of U.S. anti-discrimination laws.

"I wanted cases and day-to-day work to have broad social meaning," Harwin said. "The impact of our

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STAR



Alexandra Harwin
Sanford Heisler Sharp

Age: 32

Home base: New York

Position: Senior Litigation Counsel

Law school: Yale Law School

First job after law school: Associate at Feldesman Tucker Leifer Fidell LLP

cases [has been] broader than I ever would have expected.”

HER PROUDEST MOMENTS:

Instead of singling out any individual case, Harwin says she is most proud of any matter where she and her colleagues can effect positive change not only at the company they are litigating against but all companies in a given industry.

When a person is subjected to discriminatory treatment at work, a place where people spend most of their days, it can become all-encompassing for that individual, Harwin said.

“When you can fix a person’s employment situation, it affects their whole life,” Harwin said. “My proudest moments are when we can show the full expanse of the nation’s anti-discrimination laws ... and make it clear that the law protects people.”

MAJOR CHALLENGES SHE HAS FACED:

When she joined Sanford Heisler, Harwin says her first project was to draft a complaint against eye-care giant Alcon Laboratories Inc. and its parent company Novartis on behalf of two research scientists who claimed Alcon maintained an atmosphere that was hostile toward women and kept them from advancing their careers. The suit was later expanded to include class and collective action claims of gender discrimination by current and former employees in director-level positions, manager-level positions, specialist or analyst positions and sales positions.

In late 2015, the defendants agreed to pay \$8 million to end the suit — a deal that was later approved by the presiding judge.

“The experience of working a case from the complaint to the expansion of multiple classes and ultimately to [its resolution] was a tremendous project,” Harwin said. “It wasn’t overwhelming, but it was a challenge. I had previously summered at the firm so I had a relationship with them and they knew my work. It was a challenge that I rose to.”

TYPES OF CASES SHE MOST ENJOYS LITIGATING:

Harwin cites cases involving claims of gender bias as one of the areas she is most passionate about, saying they afford her the opportunity to work with women who are at the top of their professional careers but aren’t being treated in a way commensurate with their accomplishments.

“In college, I spent much of my academic life studying the women’s movement of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and I admire the women who worked so hard to change what the country looks like for modern women,” Harwin said. “One thing that feminist activists in the 21st century focused on was how the law could be used to promote female equality. ... I like to think of myself as being a part of that broader legacy in helping to change the law.”

ADVICE FOR YOUNG ATTORNEYS:

Although it's easy for attorneys to take an adversarial approach to cases they handle, Harwin believes young attorneys should also spend time developing their dispute resolution skills, which can come into play both in resolving an entire case and in working out smaller issues that arise while a case is being adjudicated.

"It's important to always keep in mind the goal of resolution," Harwin said. "On a macro level, you have to look strategically at whether there's a path to resolving an entire case, and, on a micro level, when it comes to things like the scope of discovery, the pace of resolving a case or other ancillary issues that come up."

--As told to Vin Gurrieri.

Law360's Rising Stars are attorneys under 40 whose legal accomplishments belie their age. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2017 Rising Stars winners after reviewing more than 1,200 submissions. This interview has been edited and condensed.