

Rising Star: Gibson Dunn's Lauren Blas

By Daniela Porat

Law360 (June 17, 2021, 3:02 PM EDT) -- Lauren Blas of Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP helped Ashley Judd revive a sexual harassment claim against Harvey Weinstein and secured a successful decertification bid of a class of 11,000 drivers for J.B. Hunt Transport Inc., earning her a spot among the top employment law practitioners under 40 honored as Law360 Rising Stars.

HER BIGGEST CASE:

While Blas has worked on many major cases, including one in front of the U.S. Supreme Court concerning state sports betting laws, one of the most intense employment law cases she has worked on involved representing J.B. Hunt against a class of 11,000 drivers who claimed that the company stiffed them of wages for nondriving tasks and denied them breaks, among other violations.

Over the decadelong case, the court had ruled in favor of the drivers' class certification twice.

"We felt like we really had to come up with something fresh to get the court to move off of those two prior rulings," Blas said.

Against the backdrop of trial prep, Blas led the briefing team during its successful 11th-hour class decertification effort and marshaled a "rich record" showing that the drivers were paid through hundreds of different payment plans and that there were no common issues among them.

"It was just a crazy amount of work and a very intense experience, but so rewarding ultimately to pull it all together and ultimately persuade the court to decertify the class," she said.

HER MOST INTERESTING RECENT CASE:

Blas is part of the team representing actress Ashley Judd in her case against convicted rapist Harvey Weinstein. She and her colleagues prevailed in the Ninth Circuit to reinstate a sexual harassment claim against the disgraced film producer under California law.



Lauren Blas
Gibson Dunn

Age: 34
 Home base: Los Angeles
 Position: Partner
 Law school: Yale Law School
 First job after law school: Law clerk for Ninth Circuit Judge Sandra S. Ikuta

The question before the court at the time was whether the actor-producer relationship was covered by section 51.9 of the California Civil Code, which is meant to protect against harassment in business services or professional relationships outside the traditional employment relationship context.

She and her colleagues successfully argued that such a relationship does fall under that Golden State statute because it, like that of a tenant and landlord, is characterized by one party having leverage over another, and "the statute was meant to correct for that power imbalance," she said.

Blas said she loves these kinds of cases that explore statutory interpretations and legislative history.

"Our hope is that those who have exercised coercive power over others and pose a serious threat for potential abuse can't escape liability for sexual harassment," she said.

The case is now back in California federal court.

WHY SHE'S AN EMPLOYMENT LAW ATTORNEY:

The issues that Blas works on every day are "instantly relatable to pretty much everybody," she said.

Employment law is characterized by "compelling human dramas" that raise important questions that are common to many because most people have either had a job or have had one at some point, and so much of a person's daily life is influenced by work.

"How do you balance the need to create an inclusive and supportive workplace with the need to manage individual performance?" she asked. "How do you think through all these changes in the nature of work — the gig economy, the work-from-home economy, the 'I'm-always-on-my-phone' economy?"

HER OTHER NOTABLE CASES:

Blas is part of a team representing Amazon in a wage and hour class action concerning security screenings. While on its face that kind of case might appear mundane, she said, the legal issues at hand lead to interesting questions about the meaning of work and when employees are subject to their employers.

Blas has also worked on several reverse discrimination cases that turn the discrimination paradigm on its head.

"Maybe for these individual employees, they're claiming that despite not necessarily being from a disadvantaged group, that they've had an experience that is not in their view consonant with equity and inclusion and being treated fairly," she said.

Blas, who is of Latin descent, added that she also tries to maintain an active pro bono immigration practice.

The case she is most proud of involved securing the release on bond for an immigrant who had been detained for years. She said that case drove home the idea that she could use her voice and the platform of a firm like Gibson Dunn to make a difference in someone's life.

"Advocacy really matters," she said.

HOW SHE THINKS THE LEGAL INDUSTRY WILL CHANGE IN THE NEXT 10 YEARS:

Blas said that employment law has taken on a much higher profile in recent years given the stakes at hand with worker misclassification, the #MeToo movement and now the COVID-19 pandemic.

Employment law is no longer a "commoditized area of the law," she said, and she expects that interest in this specific field and its importance will only grow.

"There's just no shortage of interesting angles there that are sort of top-of-mind for executives and boards," she said.

— *As told to Daniela Porat*

Law360's Rising Stars are attorneys under 40 whose legal accomplishments belie their age. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2021 Rising Stars winners after reviewing more than 1,400 submissions. Attorneys had to be under 40 as of April 30, 2021, to be eligible for this year's award. This interview has been edited and condensed.