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Nicola Hanna has practiced law for 38 years, building a career around high-stakes criminal defense work that has included representing CEOs, major corporations and individuals facing federal prosecution.

He serves as co-chair of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher LLP's white-collar defense and investigations practice group. Hanna previously served as U.S. Attorney for the Central District of California from 2019 to 2021.

Hanna was drawn to the law because of the storytelling aspect of trial work. "Taking complex subjects and boiling them down into simple, common-sense concepts that appeal to a jury's sense of right and wrong," he said.

As a young associate at Gibson Dunn, Hanna worked with veteran litigators who shaped his approach to practice. "They taught me the importance of preparation in every case we handle, and that victory tends to go to those who outwork and outthink their opponents," he said.

His recent work includes representing a CEO of a publicly traded company charged with securities fraud and tax violations. The government dropped all charges before trial. "Getting a pre-trial dismissal in a multi-count federal case is exceptionally rare," Hanna said.

He also represented the CEO of a medical device company during a federal investigation into alleged FDA violations. Through fact development, Hanna identified weaknesses in the government's case and obtained a declination. In another matter, Hanna represented a major retailer in an environmental criminal case, convincing prosecutors that a civil resolution was appropriate. The company entered into a civil consent decree.

"Each of these cases demonstrates the importance of developing the facts by identifying and interviewing potential witnesses and thoroughly analyzing available data so you can put your client's position in the proper context," Hanna said.

Hanna noted that defense attorneys face particular challenges in criminal cases. "In any criminal case, the government has the advantage initially. They may have been investigating for months before filing charges, they have powerful investigative tools at their disposal, and they have unlimited resources," he said.

Prosecutors often form conclusions about a case before defense counsel gets involved, Hanna said. "So, the defense lawyer's job is to convince the prosecutor or factfinder that there is another side to the story, either one of factual innocence or to raise mitigating facts that help explain the conduct," he said.

Looking ahead, Hanna expects increased focus on healthcare fraud investigations and cases involving trade and tariffs. "These cases impact the federal fisc, and on the export side, raise national security issues that are likely to be a priority for DOJ," he said.