

How I Made Partner: 'Speak Up About What You Want and Advocate for Yourself,' Says Jillian London of Gibson Dunn

By Law.com Staff

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Jillian London, 40, Partner at Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, Los Angeles, California

Practice area: Litigation

Law school and year of graduation: Harvard Law School, 2013

The following has been edited for style.

How long have you been at the firm?

Nine years

What was your criteria in selecting your current firm?

I practiced in New York for four years before moving to Los Angeles, and when I decided to come home to Southern California, I wanted to be at a firm with a strong entertainment practice because I had always been drawn to that industry. Gibson Dunn was a natural fit because it had the strongest entertainment practice and litigation department in Los Angeles. I had actually come very close to joining the firm years earlier, when I was considering starting my career in LA as a summer associate.

I was also drawn to Gibson Dunn's free market system. While I wanted to do entertainment work, the firm also handles the most sophisticated, complex, and high-profile matters across many other areas. I wanted the ability to explore different kinds of litigation and shape my own path over time, and there is no better place to do that than Gibson Dunn.

I was also struck by the firm's culture. The lawyers are incredibly smart and accomplished, but also sociable, welcoming, and collaborative. While I hoped Gibson Dunn would ultimately become my long-term professional home, I also recognized that training and practicing there would provide a great foundation for whatever direction my career ultimately took.

Were you an associate at another firm before joining your present firm? If so, which one and how long were you there?

Before joining Gibson Dunn, I was an associate at Davis Polk in New York between my two clerkships.

Looking back, I feel very fortunate to have trained at two elite firms that shaped different aspects of my development as a lawyer. My time at Davis Polk gave me an exceptional foundation early in my career, and I still draw on many of the lessons and experiences I had there. At the same time, Gibson Dunn proved to be an especially strong fit for me because of the breadth and sophistication of the work and the firm's deep focus on litigation.



Jillian N. London of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher.

Courtesy photo

What do you think was the deciding point for the firm in making you partner? Was it your performance on a specific case? A personality trait? Making connections with the right people?

I do not think there was one single deciding factor, but rather a combination of several things that built on each other over time. First, I worked very hard to develop the skills necessary to consistently deliver excellent work, especially under pressure and in high-stakes situations. It started with me taking ownership of smaller assignments, but over time it led to me being given ownership over larger and more complex cases.

Second, I focused on building trust with both colleagues and clients so that people knew they could rely on me when the stakes were high. That trust led to opportunities to work on great teams and important matters, which in turn helped me build strong relationships across the firm.

Third, I developed real expertise in the entertainment litigation space, which helped give me a distinct brand within the firm.

Finally, all of those things together allowed me to build strong support from many different partners and teams across the firm. I was fortunate to work with people who became genuine advocates for me and championed me when it mattered most.

Who had or has the greatest influence in your career and why?

I have been extremely fortunate to have several mentors who shaped different aspects of my career and development. Scott Edelman, who retired last year, was the former co-chair of our media, entertainment, and technology practice group in LA and had an enormous influence on me from the beginning. He was a premier entertainment lawyer and exceptional trial attorney who gave me countless opportunities early in my career and showed me that you could be many things at once in this profession: an

elite lawyer, a great mentor, and someone people genuinely loved working with.

Ted Boutrous has also had a major impact on my career. Ted is one of the preeminent First Amendment lawyers in the country and an extraordinary oral advocate. Some of my most rewarding matters have involved fighting for First Amendment rights alongside him. I have learned a tremendous amount from watching the way he communicates with clients and identifies strengths in cases others sometimes miss.

Chris Chorba has been another important mentor and supporter. He is deeply loyal to the people he works with and has always been someone I could turn to for guidance and candid advice. His high standards and attention to detail have made me a more careful lawyer.

Finally, Orin Snyder has been especially influential as I transitioned into partnership. Orin has an extraordinary ability to understand the heart of a case almost immediately and develop a winning strategy. He has also been very generous with mentorship regarding client relationships, building a practice, and shifting my mindset from associate to partner.

What advice would you give an associate who wants to make partner?

First and foremost, you need to ensure that you are consistently delivering the highest quality work. You need to be known as someone others in the firm can count on, not only for your excellent skills as a lawyer, but also as someone who is always willing to pitch in when it's needed and be a team player. Become someone people trust and genuinely want to work with repeatedly.

At the same time, it's important to speak up about what you want and advocate for yourself. Partners and mentors need to know that partnership is something you are genuinely working toward so they can help create opportunities for you along the

way. Doing great work is absolutely necessary, but it is not always sufficient. You cannot assume that keeping your head down and doing excellent work, by itself, will automatically lead to partnership.

When it comes to career planning and navigating inside a law firm, in your opinion, what's the most common mistake you see other attorneys making?

One of the most common mistakes attorneys make is approaching their careers too passively and not speaking up about what they want. At a law firm, opportunities often go to the people who actively express interest in them. When partners are staffing cases, they naturally want to work with associates who are enthusiastic about a particular type of matter or who genuinely want to work with that team. Simply making your interests known can often be the deciding factor, so associates should not assume people automatically know what they are looking for professionally.

Many lawyers also underestimate the importance of developing a clear professional identity over time. As you become more senior, people naturally begin to ask: What is this lawyer known for? What unique value do they bring? What is the narrative around their practice and career? The lawyers who are most successful are usually very intentional about building that story through the matters they take on, the relationships they develop, and the reputation they cultivate both internally and externally.

What challenges, if any, did you face or have to overcome in your career path and what was the lesson learned? How did it affect or influence your career?

One challenge was joining my current firm as a fourth-year associate. While that was not a disadvantage in any permanent sense, it did mean I had less time to build relationships and establish myself with partners who had already worked closely with other associates for several years. I had a shorter runway to demonstrate my abilities, earn

trust, and develop the broad support system that is so important within a large law firm.

I had to be proactive to overcome that, both in seeking out opportunities and advocating for myself. Early on, that meant building relationships across the firm by taking other attorneys out to lunch or coffee, or just saying yes to most matters that came my way. Later, it meant having the confidence to pursue partnership even if I had not been at the firm as long as some of my peers. That experience reinforced how important it is to combine excellent work with initiative and self-advocacy.

Another challenge has been balancing a demanding litigation career with family life. My husband is also a busy litigator and now a partner at another firm, and during my path to partnership we had three children. While incredibly rewarding, there are inevitable starts and stops that come with parental leave and ramping back up afterward. Gibson Dunn was tremendously supportive throughout those periods, but balancing those responsibilities can still be challenging. Ultimately, the experience taught me resilience, perspective, and the importance of being intentional about both career and family.

Knowing what you know now about your career path, what advice would you give to your younger self?

I would tell my younger self that careers are long and unfold in phases, with plenty of ups and downs along the way. There will be difficult periods, whether because of a challenging case, a demanding trial schedule, or the realities of balancing work and family life, but one tough stretch does not define your career. Circumstances and opportunities can change quickly, so it is important not to lose perspective during difficult moments.

I would also tell myself to spend time figuring out what I genuinely enjoy most about the practice. Early in my career, I tried many different aspects of litigation and I eventually realized which parts of

the job I truly loved and which parts I did not. Once you identify the parts of the job that energize you, it becomes much easier to build a sustainable and fulfilling career.

Early on, a partner told me that many associates leave Big Law too soon, before they reach the stage where the work becomes truly interesting and rewarding. At the beginning, you are learning the craft, but over time you develop judgment, confidence, and ownership over your practice. He also told me that your career does not really begin until you become a partner because that is an entirely new phase of professional growth. I did not fully understand that at the time, but I do now. In many ways, this next chapter feels like a very exciting beginning.

How do you utilize technology to benefit the firm/practice and/or business development?

AI has quickly become integrated into my everyday practice. I use it to pressure test ideas, refine briefs, summarize and analyze large sets of documents, mine lengthy transcripts and trial records, and help prepare for oral arguments. When I first started reading about AI and experimenting with some of the newer tools, I had a brief period of existential dread about what it would mean for the legal profession and whether lawyers would eventually be replaced. But my perspective has changed since I've started using it regularly. I realize these tools are not replacing what I do, they're enhancing it. In many ways, it has made the practice of law more efficient and effective for my firm and clients.

How would you describe your work mindset?

I would describe my work mindset as calm under pressure. In high-stakes litigation and trial work, it is important not only to work hard and do excellent work, but also to stay level-headed and maintain perspective when situations become stressful. I try

to be the steady and reliable person in the room; someone clients and colleagues know they can count on when things get difficult.

I also believe that part of being a good teammate and advocate is making situations easier, not harder, during challenging moments. Staying organized, thoughtful, and composed under pressure helps build trust with both clients and colleagues, and I think that mindset is especially important in litigation.

Do you have any advice for improving work-life balance or promoting mental wellness to avoid burnout and maintain your career momentum?

One of the most important things for avoiding burnout is building strong support systems intentionally, both inside and outside of work. Litigation can be incredibly demanding, and no one really succeeds in this profession alone. Having mentors, colleagues, friends, and family members you can rely on makes an enormous difference, especially during the more intense periods of practice.

For me personally, having a full and meaningful life outside the office has been very important. As I noted, my husband is also a litigator, we have three children, and we have been fortunate to build a wonderful community of friends and family and a life we genuinely love outside of work. That is not to say balancing everything is always easy, but I do think it is possible to have both a successful Big Law career and a deeply rewarding personal life.

I also think maintaining perspective is important. There are inevitably periods in this profession that are exhausting or overwhelming, particularly in trial work, but those periods usually pass. Some of those exhausting periods are also the most rewarding. Having people and experiences outside of work that ground you helps make the difficult stretches more manageable and the successes more meaningful.