

Rising Star: Gibson Dunn's Mary Kay Dunning

By **Stephanie Russell-Kraft**

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From her key role in the successful defense of a portfolio manager against insider trading claims to her cool and confidential work on anti-corruption investigations, Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP's Mary Kay Dunning has become a white collar powerhouse, earning her a spot on Law360's list of top legal talent

under 40.

The 37 year-old, one of four white collar attorneys on the Rising Stars list, shone as a member of the Gibson Dunn team that scored a jury trial victory in May for Wynnefield Capital portfolio manager Nelson Obus, who fought off claims by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission that he traded on inside information when Wynnefield purchased shares of SunSource Inc. The SEC had claimed Obus bought stock in an industrial products supplier after hearing from a Wynnefield employee that it was about to be acquired.



Mary Kay Dunning

The case was a "complete he-said she-said" that ultimately came down to witness credibility, according to Dunning, who said she was able to take the last witness of the case as her first ever. It was a moment in the spotlight for the associate, who had been on the case since the day it was filed in 2006.

Shortly thereafter, a 10-member jury found Obus not liable for fraud after less than 24 hours of deliberations.

"It was a moment I'll never forget," she said. "I welled up in tears, and then everybody started hugging everyone else."

Dunning had been working on the case since she was a second-year associate at Clifford Chance LLP, when she was brought on the team by partner Joel Cohen. The two of them worked so well together that he brought her with him when he moved to Gibson Dunn a few years later.

Cohen has since become one of Dunning's main mentors, bringing her into other large cases across the

white collar practice, including a long anti-corruption matter that ended in 2010.

“I just kept going back to Joel to get more work,” she said.

Dunning hadn’t always planned on becoming a white collar defense attorney. Before attending law school at Georgetown University, she studied pre-med at Princeton University and served as a Teach for America corps member for two years, teaching pre-K through eighth grade in a New Jersey public school.

But her years standing in front of a classroom of young children proved to be invaluable, Dunning said. While teaching, she learned to think on her feet and practice her oral advocacy skills.

“Corralling 40 kids into a classroom every day and keeping their attention is not unlike keeping a jury’s attention during a trial,” she said. “You have to keep it understandable and fun.”

She now brings that same enthusiasm and love for people to her work defending hedge funds and other financial institutions from government investigations.

"I do love representing individuals because you get to know them and you experience the hardship of a potential SEC investigation hanging over their heads," Dunning said.

But as a mark of her success in the field so far, Dunning can’t publicly name a significant portion of her clients.

“Most of my work is confidential, so we’re successful when the cases never see the light of day,” she said. “We’re most successful when the government walks away.”

--Editing by Brian Baresch.