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A decade of big cases: How Larson LLP built a trial-first culture

In just 10 years, Larson LLP has grown from a Los Angeles boutique into a 60-lawyer “big-case platform” with offices on two continents. But the firm’s leaders say its real edge isn’t size – it’s culture: flat hierarchy, early responsibility and a singular focus on trial advocacy.

By David Houston

Daily Journal Editor-in-Chief

Jina Yoon, an associate at Larson LLP, doesn’t have a LinkedIn account. William Wardlaw Jr., another associate, hasn’t kept his up to date. Both say they were drawn to the firm by its emphasis on face-to-face communication and its willingness to give young lawyers real responsibility early. Instead of posting, scrolling and Zooming, they spend their days in conversation with senior partners, working through some of the most difficult problems their clients face.

“You can’t get mentorship online,” Yoon said.

“Even those little conversations you overhear out in the hallway,” Wardlaw added. “You don’t get that when you’re remote.”

Stephen G. Larson, the former federal judge who founded Larson LLP a decade ago, wasn’t in the room when they said it – but he would have been proud if he had heard them.

“You cannot be a great trial lawyer from your bedroom,” Larson said.

That line could serve as the firm’s motto. Since its founding in January 2016, Larson LLP has grown from a Los Angeles litigation boutique into what its lawyers call a “big-case platform,” now nearly 60 lawyers strong with offices in Los Angeles, Orange County, Washington, D.C., and London. Its roster includes veteran trial lawyers such as Hilary Potashner, a former head of the federal public defender’s office for



Standing from left, Paul Rigali, Hilary Potashner and Stephen Larson. Sitting from left, William Wardlaw Jr., Rick Richmond and Jina Yoon | Ricardo Pineda / Daily Journal

the Central District of California; Rick Richmond and Managing Partner Paul A. Rigali, both longtime big-law partners. What unites them is not a practice niche, but a shared identity as courtroom lawyers.

“All of our work really comes through attorney referral, people who know about our strengths in the courtroom, our strong relationships and our ability to hit above our weight,” Larson said.

Rigali said the culture flows directly from that focus.

The fact that each and every attorney has chosen to build their career around a shared passion for

trial advocacy is a key difference,” he said. “The environment is very collaborative. We practice a lot of law in the hallways.”

Wardlaw, whose mother is the federal appeals court Judge Kim Wardlaw, said that was what drew him to the firm.

“I really wanted to be a part of a firm that had a Southern California practice... I care so much about this community. I grew up here. I deeply care about Los Angeles... this place has such roots in it... a former judge, the former defender, folks that have been practicing in this region for decades.”

The firm’s identity was shaped early by sprawling, high-stakes litigation. One of its first major matters arose out of The Colonies at San Antonio, a massive Upland development that generated parallel criminal and civil proceedings. Larson secured acquittals for the criminal defendants and then won a landmark civil rights settlement.

“We followed up the win in the criminal case with a civil rights lawsuit resulting in the largest single individual civil rights settlement for prosecutorial misconduct in California history – a comprehensive win,” Larson said. “It demonstrated



From left, Rich Richmond, William Wardlaw J., Jina Yoon, Hilary Potashner, Stephen Larson and Paul Rigali
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our ability not only to handle criminal cases or civil cases, but kind of the multi three-level chess."

The model scaled internationally in the Eurasian Natural Resources Corporation matter, where Larson represented the executive at the center of a sweeping, multi-agency corruption probe spanning the U.S. and U.K.

"This matter involved the Serious Frauds Office... the U.S. Attorneys' Office for the Eastern District of New York, the SEC, and IRS CID," Rigali said.

"We succeeded... literally getting letters of declination from Scotland Yard," Larson said.

Then the firm sued back - and won.

"We did an internal investigation of the internal investigation by Dechert," Larson recalled. "And that led to a successful lawsuit against the SFO, against Dechert over in London."

"It shaped what we do, how we do it, and even the footprint of the firm," he said.

Although known primarily as a defense firm, Larson LLP maintains a carefully controlled plaintiff-side practice.

"I keep a very strict control over the percentage of resources devoted to plaintiff's work... That's the business model," Larson said. Still, he added, "I've always had it in me..."

the plaintiff side civil work is kind of a form of prosecution."

That practice has produced some of the largest securities settlements of the past decade, including \$165 million in the Snap IPO case and \$250 million in the Rivian IPO litigation. The firm also held leadership roles in the Huntington Beach oil-spill litigation and now leads a major consumer class action over the Episource data breach.

"We're primarily a defense firm; we do very select, high-end plaintiffs work," Larson said.

Rigali said what truly separates Larson from other elite litigation firms is a focus on being generalists.

"We have not divided the firm's attorneys into practice groups," he said. "We believe taking on a wide variety of legal issues makes us better lawyers and better storytellers. This is an edge at trial."

That structure has allowed partners like Potashner and Richmond to build broad practices.

Potashner's recent wins range from defeating professional-discipline charges and fraud lawsuits to blocking extradition and dismantling criminal prosecutions. "I've tried a number of cases since I've been here," she said. "And I'm just not sure that you can say that for every firm in the city."

One recent case she is especially proud of was securing a dismissal of a lawsuit against a major law firm - a result that was upheld on appeal.

"I think that's really nice when lawyers come to us and say, 'Can you help us with this?' I think that reflects [well] on us," she said. "They trust us, they respect us, and they're willing to put something that's really important to them in our hands. And I couldn't ask for more support than that."

Richmond, meanwhile, won an en banc 9th Circuit victory for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, defended landlords in constitutional rent-control litigation, and shut down felony animal-cruelty charges against a Northern California rancher.

"Big firms over time have adopted certain cultures and ideas of the kinds of clients they want and the kinds of matters they will take on," he said, "and that's just not true with this law firm."

"I have never felt more supported and loved by my partners than I have here," he said.

Associates say the culture translates into unusually early responsibility. Yoon has already ran an internal investigation and first-chaired a trial.

'We're the big case platform.'

— *Rick Richmond*

'I've tried a number of cases since I've been here.'

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'We practice a lot of law in the hallways.'

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'You cannot be a great trial lawyer from your bedroom.'

— *Stephen G. Larson*

"I did all the interviews... I came up with all the recommendations," she said of the investigation. "I won a dollar. But a win is a win," she quipped of the trial.

Rigali said the structure is deliberate to ensure the longevity of the firm.

"I hope that 10 years from now, our colleagues today still call Larson home and that we are all still litigating cases that interest and excite us," he said.

Larson said the firm's focus will remain the same in the next 10 years.

"At the beginning, I wanted to be able to fight a two-front war," he said. "Then I went to, well, we got to be able to fight a three-front war... which we have been."

"I just want us to be the preeminent trial firm," he said.

david_houston@dailyjournal.com