

Labor Secrets

A look at some top employment lawyers who work under the radar

By Scott Graham

Ask anyone who's the best trial lawyer or the best IP litigator in California, and you'll probably hear the names of well-known, \$700-per-hour senior rainmakers at California's largest law firms.

But there are a great many superb lawyers practicing outside the headlines at smaller firms all over the state or in more junior positions at the megafirms. They may not have the same name recognition — but they also don't usually come with the same price tag.

To come up with the names of some hidden gems among outside employment lawyers, we surveyed in-house counsel at large, medium and small companies all over the state. We took their recommendations and cross-checked them with mediators and plaintiff attorneys who specialize in employment law.

The result: a select list of four attorneys — two in San Diego (at the same firm, no less), one in Los Angeles and one in San Francisco. All four began at big firms before striking out on their own. We don't mean to suggest that these are the only great lower-profile attorneys who are practicing employment law in California. No doubt there are many others. But we're nonetheless pleased to identify a few who may be flying under the radar.

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CHRISTINE JEGAN

RICHARD AMADOR: "I do what needs to be done to win — not everything that can be done," says the Los Angeles attorney.

Richard Amador's biggest courtroom claim to fame came last year, when a judge ruled that Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton had overbilled Amador's client, the city of South Gate, by some \$800,000. The case made a big splash in the media when Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge John Shook opined that Sheppard's fees transcended "beyond the stratosphere into deep outer space." Amador says he used the ruling to leverage about \$2 million in refunds from various law firms to South Gate.

But that case was *sui generis* for Amador, whose practice more typically

focuses on employment matters for clients such as Wells Fargo Bank, Comerica Bank, California State University, Yahoo and Harley-Davidson. "Richard can be a very aggressive litigator when appropriate," says an in-house attorney at a big corporate client. "He is the only attorney I've ever permitted to bring a malicious prosecution lawsuit for us."

Amador brings a strong presence not only in court but in internal discussions as well, according to this client. "He does not equivocate. If he thinks he can get summary judgment in a case, he'll tell

you instead of saying that it 'might' be possible. Richard also has the right gravitas when dealing with our internal clients."

The in-house lawyer's opinion tracks Amador's philosophy: "The most important thing is to do excellent work. Beyond that, it's about taking care of clients," he says. "One of the things that seems to resonate with my clients a lot, I do what needs to be done to win — not everything that can be done."

Amador thinks some lawyers are too worried about being second-guessed or sued for malpractice if they don't serve every possible interrogatory or take every conceivable deposition. "I could be wrong but it's going to be a heck of a lot cheaper and faster to do it this way," he sometimes tells his clients. "I've been able to get really, really outstanding results for my clients, and that gets you the trust."

Amador co-founded his Los Angeles firm, Sanchez & Amador, about 12 years ago with partner David Sanchez. Amador had been an associate at Loeb & Loeb and Sanchez, who practices corporate law, had worked at Stroock & Stroock & Lavan. Amador says the firm has been in a growing mode and recently recruited

for three new positions.

Amador is a member of the 2006 steering committee of the California Minority Counsel Program and has been a recipient of the State Bar of California's Wiley M. Manuel award for pro bono legal services. Most of all, he's happy to be practicing. "I really love what I do," he says.

Along with the four lawyers profiled above, a couple of other employment lawyers seemed deserving of honorable mentions.

In-house attorneys at Golden West Financial commend Malcolm Heinicke, at Munger, Tolles & Olson. "Malcolm knows labor law inside out," says Michael Roster, Golden West's GC. "He doesn't hem and haw about what the issues are even though some areas may be gray. If there are gray areas, usually because of ambiguities in the law, he tells you so but then gives sound advice as to what to consider doing in light of the ambiguities.

Adds Roster: "When Malcolm meets with the HR and business people, he quickly earns their confidence. He draws out the facts with a precise focus on what counts."

Heinicke has been a lawyer less than 10 years. He made partner at Munger, Tolles as a sixth-year in 2003. He is president-elect of the Bar

Association of San Francisco's Barristers Club and serves as chairman of San Francisco's Human Rights Commission. With Heinicke, clients also get the bonus of one of the West Coast's top litigation shops behind him, Roster notes. "As with everyone else at Munger, Malcolm staffs matters leanly but with people who know what they are doing," says Roster. "He and his team always stay focused on outcomes and solutions."

Linda Lawson, managing partner at 17-lawyer Meserve, Mumper & Hughes in Los Angeles, is a favorite of an in-house attorney at another large financial institution. "The phrase that best describes her is 'business minded,'" says this attorney, who asked to remain anonymous. "She understands how her in-house legal clients and business clients look at issues. She understands that there is a cost associated with everything that happens in litigation and will help her client make the cost/benefit analysis. Ultimately, she helps her clients make the best business decisions." Lawson has a traditional management-side employment practice and also represents insurance companies in matters relating to life, health and disability coverage and ERISA. ❖

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