

Rising Star: Covington's Neema Sahni

By Emily Brill

Law360 (July 24, 2023, 11:34 AM EDT) -- Since starting her career at Covington & Burling LLP over a decade ago, Neema Sahni has helped lead high-powered litigation teams representing clients such as Universal, Warner, Sony, CBS Interactive and the NFL, earning her a spot among media and entertainment law practitioners under age 40 honored by Law 360 Rising Stars.

HOW SHE CHOSE THE PRACTICE AREA:

Sahni was hired at Covington fresh out of Harvard Law, after completing her summer associateship at the firm. At that point, she wasn't yet sure which practice areas she'd work in, but an early experience representing the Tennis Channel in a case against Comcast sparked an interest in media and entertainment law.

That interest solidified when, from January 2014 through July 2015, she served as an in-house counsel at the Walt Disney Co. before rejoining Covington, where she was promoted to partner in 2019.

"I learned a tremendous amount about the media industry and found it fascinating," Sahni said. "I was pretty deliberate when I came back to the firm about trying to focus on and develop expertise in that area."

Sahni said she enjoys helping media and entertainment clients navigate the shifting legal landscape so they can focus on "what they're supposed to be doing: telling stories and creating content." Working with people dedicated to the creative industry is invigorating, she said.

THE BIGGEST CASE OF HER CAREER:

In August 2022, Sahni wrapped up the biggest case of her career so far — a hard-fought, multiyear copyright infringement case brought by a slew of major record labels in March 2019 against internet service providers Charter Communications and Bright House Networks.

The case, in which Sahni co-led the Covington team representing the record labels, settled that month on the eve of trial. The record labels argued that Charter and Bright House were vicariously liable for internet users' music

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Neema Sahni
Covington & Burling

Age: 39

Home base: Los Angeles

Position: Partner

Law school: Harvard Law School

First job after law school: Associate with Covington & Burling LLP

piracy by failing to step in to stop it.

"The overall enterprise of helping our music clients protect their most valuable IP is important and part of why I was drawn to this area to begin with, so I was proud to be part of that effort," Sahni said. "The case involved really strong lawyering on both sides, and there were a number of interesting factual and legal issues."

Sahni said she's been drawn since law school to statutory interpretation — a pursuit she's had many opportunities to engage in while navigating the constantly evolving arena of media and entertainment law.

OTHER NOTABLE CASES:

Another high-profile case Sahni has taken on that's involved statutory interpretation is a legal fight between an Illinois city and a subsidiary of her client Paramount Global, which runs the streaming service Paramount Plus.

"The city of East St. Louis took the position that a statute related to the collection of franchise fees was applicable to over-the-top streaming providers like Paramount Plus and Netflix," Sahni said. "Those laws really were developed for a different distribution model that involves using the public right of way — traditional cable, where you're tearing up the sidewalk and laying wires in the ground."

Co-leading a team of Covington attorneys, Sahni secured the dismissal of the suit on behalf of Paramount subsidiary CBS Interactive. The suit is now up on appeal before the Seventh Circuit.

"We made a number of arguments, amongst them that the city didn't actually have a private right of action to bring the claim," Sahni said. "The district court ultimately found in our favor on that ground, and it's now up on appeal and fully briefed."

"I think the Paramount case is interesting from a legal perspective," Sahni continued. "It was great to partner with high-caliber lawyers at other firms and workshop a number of challenging issues. We had some First Amendment arguments, some preemption arguments. And we were able to bounce those off each other."

Sahni's other recent accomplishments include piloting the media executive Shari Redstone through insurance coverage litigation stemming from the Viacom-CBS merger and representing the NFL in litigation challenging elements of the Chargers' move from San Diego to Los Angeles and the Raiders' move from Oakland to Las Vegas.

The suit involving Redstone is ongoing, with a Delaware Superior Court judge denying the insurers' motion to dismiss in February. The NFL suits have been dismissed.

PROUDEST MOMENT AS AN ATTORNEY:

Sahni said her proudest moment as an attorney was helping represent the city of Los Angeles pro bono in litigation challenging the Trump administration's "sanctuary cities" regulation. The city secured a block on applying the regulation to Los Angeles.

Had the regulation applied, Los Angeles would have been denied a public safety grant unless it notified the U.S. Department of Homeland Security when unauthorized immigrants were about to be released from jail and gave federal agents the ability to meet with jailed unauthorized immigrants.

"This was a case we saw all the way through the district court up through the appeal, and the city attorney's office was kind enough to let me argue the appeal," Sahni said. She said she felt honored to represent the city she lived in before the Ninth Circuit, and she believed strongly in the city's arguments.

When the city won the case before the Ninth Circuit, Sahni told Law360 that the ruling "helps ensure that Los Angeles receives critical criminal justice funding to promote the city's public safety efforts."

WHAT MOTIVATES HER:

Though Sahni enjoys grappling with complex legal issues, she said what motivates her at the end of the day is working with clients.

"I'm a people person — naturally extroverted," Sahni said. "I grew up in a community in Tucson, Arizona, surrounded by a very supportive Indian community where I was essentially group-raised by this amazing collective of families. So I derive energy from people.

"What I like about being a lawyer is that element — getting to know my clients and understanding the dynamics of what's driving and motivating them, and figuring out how we can take these concepts in case law that can sometimes feel abstract and actually bring them to the level of real people with real problems," Sahni continued.

She said that in a similar vein, she's motivated by working with her fellow attorneys at Covington.

"What motivates me is the people behind the legal issues," Sahni said.

--As told to Emily Brill. Additional reporting by Lauren Berg.

Law360's Rising Stars are attorneys under 40 whose legal accomplishments belie their age. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2023 Rising Stars winners after reviewing more than 1,350 submissions. Attorneys had to be under 40 as of May 1, 2023, to be eligible for this year's award. This interview has been edited and condensed.