



## Top Female Trial Attorney: Crowell & Moring's Janet Levine

By Karlee Weinmann

*Law360, New York (May 14, 2012, 7:08 PM ET)* -- Crowell & Moring LLP's white collar expert Janet I. Levine rocketed to national prominence in 2005 when she won a dismissal of charges for her client, an alleged double agent in a front-page scandal that sullied U.S. intelligence operations. In protecting others' reputations over the past three decades, Levine has earned one for herself, landing her a spot on the list of Law360's Top Female Trial Attorneys.

Long a presence in California court, Levine is one of 15 lawyers named to the list. Considered to be painstaking and patient, with a subdued pugnacity, she has tried more than 20 white collar cases, including several lasting more than a month, serving as the first chair in each. She has worked with co-counsel in some cases, but has always at least co-tried them.

Levine's 2005 representation of Katrina Leung, the accused double agent whose scandal tarnished the Federal Bureau of Investigation's intelligence-gathering methods and embarrassed high-ranking agency officials, made headlines the world over. The case, a sensational story of an alleged socialite spy's dual interests and love affair, was covered exhaustively by national and global media — including when Levine spearheaded the dismissal of the bombshell charges, proving prosecutorial misconduct.

Most recently, in March she notched a mistrial for her client, the chief financial officer of BCI Aircraft Leasing Inc., who had been implicated in a \$50 million fraud scheme. Her win came despite the fact that the same jury had convicted the company and its CEO of bribery in the scam.

In 2011, she defended a client in a rare Foreign Corrupt Practices Act case, one of just a few to ever go to trial under the law. During the five-week proceedings, Levine blasted the U.S. Department of Justice team for prosecutorial misconduct, causing the court to lift charges against her client, a Lindsey Manufacturing Co. executive implicated in a cross-border conspiracy to bribe Mexican officials.

The most recent victories have cemented her place among the industry's best, said Ron Nessim, a Bird Marella Boxer Wolpert Nessim Dooks & Lincenberg PC partner. Nessim told Law360 he's known Levine since 1984, when she was starting out as a young public defender in Los Angeles and he worked as a prosecutor.

"She's always been well-regarded and she's always been really an A-plus lawyer," he said. "But I think that her recent success ... you never know when you're going to get the trials that sort of show who you are. She's gotten those, and she deserves the attention and acclaim she's getting."

Levine's success has surprised few in the California legal community who have known her, at least by reputation, since she graduated as a star student from Loyola Law School Los Angeles in 1980.

After meeting her in the early 1980s, Alvin Michaelson knew he had to woo the fresh-faced public defender to his criminal defense firm. He couldn't pay her what bigger, deeper-pocketed firms could pony up, but he knew when he met her he had to reel in the magnetic, driven young attorney.

Lucky for him, Levine wanted to work with him, too; she eschewed big-ticket offers in favor of joining up with a colleague that shared her legal sense. The two were partners for 15 years.

"She believed she could do it all from the day she got here," Michaelson told Law360. "This was not someone who was going to be some sort of law clerk or some associate. She had a history of doing well. She had a lot of confidence in herself."

After leaving Michaelson & Levine Law Offices, Levine switched over to a boutique white collar firm, Lightfoot Vandavelde Sadowsky Crouchley Rutherford & Levine LLP, which in 2008 was swallowed into what is now Crowell & Moring's Los Angeles outpost.

Levine landed in defense by happenstance, she said. After law school, she interviewed both to be a prosecutor and a public defender, but a hiring freeze in the District Attorney's Office made her choice easy.

Though she has never crossed over to be a prosecutor or worked for a government agency, Levine says she could have played that side just as well.

"I don't defend because I believe only in defense and not in prosecution," she told Law360. "I think I could have done either side. ... I firmly believe in the system — our system of justice. I think it's inspired."

Her fierce commitment to that system rose out of the Watergate scandal, which rocked the nation when Levine was earning her undergraduate degree at the University of California, Los Angeles. She'd never been around lawyers before, but she became obsessed with the way they "investigated, tried and fixed things."

"I just never thought of law and the rule of law in the same way after that," she said. "I wanted to be a part of it."

She says she's never lost that that fierce dedication, respect and awe for the court system. "I make myself cry when I talk about it," she half-jokingly said.

That passion comes through clearly in her work — both in and out of court, said Brian Hennigan, now a partner at Irell & Manella LLP who has known Levine for 25 years, since he was in the U.S. Attorney's Office trying cases against her as a public defender.

Since then, he has gone into private practice and they have co-counseled on several white collar cases.

“She is not a shrinking violet,” Hennigan said. “You don’t really ever have to guess if she has something to say. If she has something to say, she will say it.”

While Hennigan says the gender composition of the courts has undergone a massive shift over the last couple of generations, the white collar practice area is still almost as male-dominated as ever. Hennigan estimates about 95 percent of people under white collar investigation are male, as are about 90 percent of bar-approved white collar attorneys.

But Levine has emerged as an industry powerhouse, conquering what once was much more of a boys’ club. She chairs her Crowell & Moring’s white collar and regulatory enforcement group, and formerly chaired the American Bar Association’s white collar committee. She now heads up the ABA’s entire criminal justice section.

“I think if there’s an area where she is really doing well,” Hennigan said, “it is the fact that in the white collar [practice], there aren’t many women who have stepped to the forefront.”

Levine says she’s surprised she’s not in the company of more women practicing white collar law.

“I don’t know why there are not more women that do what I do,” she said. “I don’t see barriers except the traditional barriers in getting business, because women traditionally haven’t done that as well. We’re getting better, though.”

Though being one of relatively few women in the field might make her stand out, Hennigan said it works to her credit that she doesn’t use her womanhood or motherhood — Levine has two adult children — to appeal to judges and juries.

Instead, he says, she comes off in the courtroom as well-rounded and well-traveled, someone who reaches people through her wealth of life experience and, even more than that, integrity.

“People hear her and say, ‘I have a lot more trust in this person, it’s not simply like she’s trying to sell me a bill of goods,’” Hennigan said. “She’s really a person that’s got a sense of life and life’s experiences.”

It’s all rooted in protecting her clients’ interests — their reputations, their families and their rights.

In one case, Hennigan and Levine each represented a defendant in a widespread racketeering case in which a supermarket magnate and his family faced allegations of tax evasion and an attempted murder conspiracy.

During the high-stakes proceedings, in which both attorneys saw their clients’ charges dismissed ahead of trial, the California district judge appointed a rather obstinate receiver, as Hennigan recalls. The older gentleman seemed to be used to going unquestioned in legal proceedings, Hennigan added.

But Levine lives to question, especially to foster accountability — and even more, to protect her client.

“At some point, he said something to Janet in one of the meetings before a hearing ... something where it was clear he was conveying she was out of her league,” Hennigan said. “She laid into him for about 10 minutes.”

After a short break, Hennigan recalled, the receiver came back with plan modifications friendlier to Levine and her client.

“She thinks, ‘My role is I’m going to protect my client and I’m going to get that done,’” Hennigan said. “If it requires me playing rough with you or me playing nice with you, that’s what it’s going to be.”

But that doesn’t always mean being a polarizing figure, Bird Marella’s Nessim said, recounting a recent conversation they shared after Levine nailed the FCPA victory.

The judge in the case made an off-the-cuff remark in pretrial proceedings, Nessim said, using “some unfortunate term” to suggest that Levine was burying prosecutors in dead-end motions. Levine, unwilling to back down and yet rarely abrasive, fired back in her way, Nessim said.

“I know she responded to it in a way that caused him to gracefully back down from that comment and did not at all scar the relationship or, back him into a corner,” he said, noting that not every lawyer has that ability to finesse. “I think she strikes a balance as well as it can be struck.”

But it’s not just the public aspects of a court case or trial that showcase Levine’s tenacity, fellow Crowell & Moring white collar partner Jeffrey H. Rutherford told Law360.

“The long hours spent preparing, the time that she gives to me and other people to brainstorm and think through cases, the strategizing that goes on just among lawyers,” said Rutherford, who was recruited to Lightfoot Vandeveld by Levine. “It’s the stuff that not a lot of other people get to see, where she really excels.”

--Editing by Sarah Golin.

All Content © 2003-2011, Portfolio Media, Inc.