

MVP: Williams & Connolly's Sarah M. Harris

By Clarice Silber

Law360 (September 13, 2021, 4:59 PM EDT) -- Sarah Harris of Williams & Connolly LLP's appellate practice successfully argued two cases before the U.S. Supreme Court in the past year, including one involving a 5-4 decision that found former railroad workers have the right to appeal in federal court if the Railroad Retirement Board refuses to reopen their prior benefits claim, earning her a spot as one of Law360's 2021 Appellate MVPs.

HER BIGGEST ACCOMPLISHMENT THIS YEAR:

Harris pointed to her back-to-back victories before the Supreme Court: one in which she represented former railroad worker Manfredo Salinas, and another where she represented two individuals seeking Social Security disability benefits that resulted in a unanimous ruling for her clients.

In the latter case, the Supreme Court was deciding whether Social Security applicants can raise arguments in court that the Social Security Administration hadn't considered when appealing the denial of their benefit application.

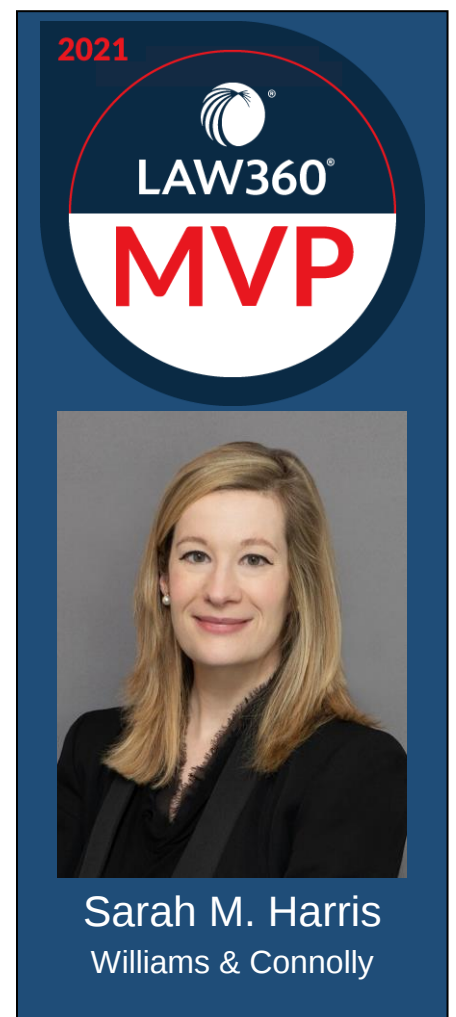
"They both happened to be benefits cases, but I think they were both hard-fought wins, especially Salinas, which was our first 5-to-4 of the term," Harris said. "So, I think for me, that was personally my biggest accomplishment."

HER BIGGEST CHALLENGE THIS YEAR:

In a year engulfed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Harris said the virus presented a challenge in keeping up the comradery of appellate work.

Harris described that aspect of appellate work as "one of the ingredients that makes it so fun," and finding ways to do virtual coffees and staying in touch with colleagues become a focus for her to ensure those personal connections were maintained.

Harris said she thinks that there is a misconception that someone who works in her field is "tapping away at your keyboard or sort of just up there ... at the podium."



"It really is a particularly team intensive endeavor and so to not be able to have team meetings in person, to not be able to go to coffees together, I really found hard, and I think other people have too," she said.

HER PROUDEST MOMENT THIS YEAR:

Harris drew her proudest moment from watching associates on her team have opportunities to argue before courts of appeals and having the chance to mentor them.

"I am really proud that we had so many people with arguments in courts of appeals who are associates," she said.

WHY SHE IS AN APPELLATE ATTORNEY:

Harris had a difficult time deciding what area of law she wanted to specialize in, and even considers her entry into appellate work a happy accident in some ways.

For her, the draw of being an appellate attorney comes from its combination of problem-solving, storytelling and the ability to be a generalist.

"And I think it's just getting to the heart of a case and sort of clearing away the underbrush from the briefing below, and figuring out how are you going to tell the story of this case to the Supreme Court or to a court of appeals," Harris added.

WHAT MOTIVATES HER:

Harris draws her motivation from the combination of a desire to win in the moment and "wanting to build a life in the law."

"I think it's a way of having a life in the law, a way of sort of feeling that it is important, like everyone wants to win, I certainly do, but also understanding you're part of a bigger picture, you are helping to create lasting precedent that affects a lot of people and that is a privilege," she said.

Harris said appellate practices are uniquely collegial and give those lawyers the feeling they are making a difference due to their participation in Supreme Court cases that tend to affect a lot of people across the nation. She said she feels it is "a privilege to get to work in an area of law that does actually have a lasting influence."

HER ADVICE FOR JUNIOR ATTORNEYS:

The most important thing to remember is don't be a jerk, Harris said.

"I really think that is a valid piece of advice, it might sound very superficial, but it was the best piece of advice I got when I was at 2L," she said. "And I asked someone who I really admired for advice back then, and it is so true because the appellate bar is really small, D.C. is really small, and being nice always pays dividends and not being nice does not pay dividends."

Harris said that she can remember being a young attorney and interning and meeting different people, "and people like that who take an interest in your career when you are young, and are nice to you and show a model of how to be a good lawyer, can really make a difference."

OTHER NOTABLE CASES SHE'S WORKED ON:

Harris was the principal brief writer for the Pennsylvania school district involved in the recent free

speech case before the Supreme Court concerning a student cheerleader who was disciplined for a vulgar social media message she sent while she wasn't on school grounds.

In that case, the Supreme Court ruled the school district violated the cheerleader's First Amendment rights by disciplining her for an expletive-laden complaint on social media after she was not selected for the varsity team, but the majority fell short of holding that schools lack the authority to regulate all off-campus speech.

Harris, who wrote the brief on behalf of the Mahanoy Area School District, said her mother's longtime work as a school principal made her feel a family connection to the case and gave her a sense of appreciation "that school districts have a very hard job and just sort of understanding how ... the policies normally work, what are they trying to accomplish."

"And I think the other interesting thing about it was just sort of — again it's such a tricky and interesting area of First Amendment law, and ... the larger system has changed over history in terms of what the court has said, and so seeing that historical progression, I thought was absolutely fascinating," Harris said.

— *As told to Clarice Silber*

Law360's MVPs are attorneys who have distinguished themselves from their peers over the past year through high-stakes litigation, record-breaking deals and complex global matters. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2021 MVP winners after reviewing nearly 900 submissions.