

## Rising Star: Willkie's Michael De Voe Piazza

By Matt Fair

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After a year spent helping his firm plant its flag firmly in Houston's booming legal market while also guiding clients including EIG Global Energy Partners through complex transactions, Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP partner Michael De Voe Piazza has earned a spot among Law360's Rising Stars in the energy field.

Less than a year after making partner at Bracewell & Giuliani LLP last spring, the 37-year-old Rising Star was tapped by Willkie Farr at the end of October alongside two other attorneys to launch the firm's outpost in Houston.

"It was an honor and it's been a challenge that I embrace," Piazza said in an interview with Law360. "It's been a really thrilling experience, not one without its challenges, but we're happy with how it's taken shape."



Michael De Voe Piazza

Bruce Herzog, a partner who practices in Willkie's corporate and financial services department, said that Piazza had been instrumental in the firm's decision to set up shop in Houston.

"Michael's agreement to join us was critical to our decision to open a Houston office," Herzog said. "We heard of his talents from many sources in the Houston market, and he has been a key contributor to our success there. Michael is proving to be a go-to advisor for his generation of deal makers and has already introduced important new client relationships to the firm. He plays an important role recruiting additional talent and been instrumental in promoting Willkie in the market. He is a genuine star, not just a rising star."

Before taking on the challenge of helping Willkie Farr make its debut in Texas, Piazza was helping to drive major deals on behalf of clients at Bracewell.

Last spring, he led a team of a dozen attorneys representing EIG Global Energy Partners as it entered a joint venture with TPG Capital LP to purchase \$1.8 billion worth of natural gas properties in Wyoming's Jonah Field from Encana Corp.

Piazza said that TPG was already deeply involved in the process to acquire Encana's assets when EIG was tapped to come on board as minority partner. As a result, he said his team had less than a month to conduct due diligence and negotiate the joint venture agreement with TPG.

“TPG had begun negotiating the M&A transaction and had been conducting significant diligence on the assets, so when EIG came in we had to get up to speed,” he said. “It was a real challenge to get all of that work done in a short time frame. We had to work through some unique issues, but everybody was very pleased with how it turned out.”

The partnership resulted in the acquisition of 24,000 acres of total productive area, more than 1,500 active wells and 100,000 undeveloped acres adjacent to the field, TPG said at the time.

While still at Bracewell, he also representing a Highbridge Capital Management LLC unit in its \$350 million recapitalization of the oil and gas exploration company Alta Mesa Holdings LP.

Piazza said that the deal included several complicated components including a deal to end Alta Mesa’s relationship with its previous private equity sponsor, a credit facility involving a loan from Highbridge to Alta Mesa, and an agreement allowing Highbridge to acquire convertible preferred equity in the oil and gas company.

“We were sort of running on parallel paths with all three of those components and it went on for several months,” he said. “It was a really exciting and complicated transaction.”

And Piazza has not slowed down since joining Willkie Farr.

Piazza is currently representing Sage Midstream LLC as it works to develop both a fractionation facility in North Dakota that would transport liquefied petroleum gas by rail to a new propane and butane export terminal in Washington state

“This is a project with multiple phases,” he said. “You’ve got the phase in North Dakota, the transportation phase, and the terminal and export phase. I’m working with a lot of local legal experts and subject matter experts, and I’m quarterbacking here in Houston.”

He said that the potential price tag for the terminal in Washington alone has been estimated at \$300 million.

“It is really an exciting project,” he said. “It’s just so different from the standard M&A and joint venture work.”

With a major energy boom buoying the Texas legal market in recent years, Piazza said that Willkie Farr’s existing talent in the private equity sphere has provided a new opportunity for clients he’s been working with for years.

“Willkie is a really established presence in the private equity space and, as my clients are getting involved in more and more equity raises, having top-notch fund-formation expertise and restructuring expertise has been a huge benefit,” he said. “It’s allowed me to enhance my practice.”

--Editing by Emily Kokoll.