

Rising Star: Willkie's Debra M. Sinclair

By Rick Archer

Law360 (June 9, 2022, 2:02 PM EDT) -- Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP partner Debra Sinclair helped secure tens of millions of dollars for creditors in the bankruptcy of Mexico's flag carrier airline and played a part in one of the fastest Chapter 11 turnarounds in U.S. history, earning her a spot among the bankruptcy law practitioners under age 40 honored by Law360 as Rising Stars.

WHY SHE'S A BANKRUPTCY ATTORNEY:

Sinclair said her path into the legal profession started early, with her parents — a court officer and a court reporter.

"I grew up familiar with the court system all my life," she said.

She said she decided on law school because she liked the idea of being both a "professional advocate and a problem solver," and she discovered bankruptcy law offered both, giving her the opportunity to craft bankruptcy plans and then argue for them in court.

THE BIGGEST CASE OF HER CAREER:

Sinclair was among the partners leading the team representing the official committee of unsecured creditors of Grupo Aeromexico, Mexico's flag carrier, after COVID-19 travel restrictions sent the company into Chapter 11 in a New York bankruptcy court in 2020.

The case involved restructuring a company with approximately \$5 billion in assets operating in multiple countries while the worldwide airline industry struggled with the pandemic, she said.

"That made it a very challenging environment for everybody at the table," she said.

The unsecured creditors committee remained in opposition to the airline's reorganization plans until January, when they reached an agreement on the morning of the plan confirmation hearing that increased the payout to unsecured creditors by \$40 million.

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STAR**



Debra M. Sinclair

Willkie Farr

Age: 33

Home base: New York

Position: Partner

Law school: New York University School of Law

First job after law school: Associate at Weil Gotshal & Manges LLP

OTHER NOTABLE CASES:

Sinclair has also represented unsecured creditors in the Chapter 11 of Colombian airline Avianca and an ad hoc noteholder group in the bankruptcy case of the Southeastern retail chain [Belk Inc.](#), which entered bankruptcy Feb. 24, 2021, with a plan to slash \$450 million in debt and exited 12 hours later in one of the fastest bankruptcy turnarounds in U.S. history.

The key was getting a nearly unanimous agreement from its lenders on a bankruptcy plan before the case was filed, she said.

"The company really needed a balance sheet restructuring rather than an operational restructuring," she said.

HER PROUDEST MOMENT AS AN ATTORNEY:

Sinclair said her proudest moment as an attorney was representing automobile industry supplier Pace Industries in its Delaware bankruptcy.

The Pace case was prepared almost entirely under lockdown and involved one of the first all-remote first-day Chapter 11 hearings in April 2020, all while Sinclair was eight months pregnant with her first child, she said.

"I left that case feeling I can handle any kind of challenge my career hands me," she said.

ON THE FUTURE OF THE PRACTICE:

She said pandemic restrictions have changed the bankruptcy practice without completely transforming it. She said the transition to teleconferencing has been smooth and has allowed increased professional and personal flexibility, but that she makes a point of having in-person meetings when she can.

"There's something to be said for gathering in a room with colleagues, together," she said.

— *As told to Rick Archer*

Law360's Rising Stars are attorneys under 40 whose legal accomplishments belie their age. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2022 Rising Stars winners after reviewing more than 1,350 submissions. Attorneys had to be under 40 as of April 30, 2022, to be eligible for this year's award. This interview has been edited and condensed.