

Appellate Group Of The Year: Williams & Connolly

By **Patrick Hoff**

Law360 (February 7, 2025, 4:03 PM EST) -- Williams & Connolly's appellate team led Starbucks to a Supreme Court victory that changed the standard for NLRB officials seeking injunctions against employers, and convinced it to overturn a former Indiana mayor's conviction by narrowing a federal bribery law's scope, earning the firm recognition as one of the 2024 Law360 Appellate Groups of the Year.

Led by Lisa Blatt, who spent 13 years in the U.S. Solicitor General's Office and clerked for former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Williams & Connolly LLP's appellate group includes more than 30 attorneys and has argued more than 11 merits cases before the high court in its past two terms.

"It takes a lot of work and energy, and you just can't ever let up," Blatt said. "Case after case, you try to win every case, and I just feel like it is relentless."

In June 2024, the Williams & Connolly appellate team secured a Supreme Court win for Pfizer Inc. in an Anti-Terrorism Act lawsuit filed by American military service members and their families against more than a dozen pharmaceutical companies. The service members claimed the companies provided medical goods and funds to Iraq's Health Ministry, which the allegedly Hezbollah-linked military group, Jaysh al-Mahdi, had taken over, and this ultimately helped fund terrorist attacks between 2005 and 2011.

A Washington, D.C., federal judge dismissed the pharmaceutical case in 2020, but the D.C. Circuit revived the suit two years later. Last year, the justices told the circuit court to reconsider the dispute in light of the Supreme Court's 2023 decision in *Twitter Inc. v. Taamneh*, which dismissed a lawsuit accusing Twitter of aiding and abetting the Islamic State group by setting up algorithms that recommended its content.

Blatt said she's also proud of her arguments before the high court on behalf of James Snyder, the former mayor of Portage, Indiana, who was convicted in 2021 and sentenced to 21 months in prison for accepting a \$13,000 payment from a garbage truck company after he already steered city contracts its way. Snyder argued Title 18 of the U.S. Code, Section 666, only criminalizes quid pro quo bribery and not rewards given after an official act.

The justices in a 6-3 decision in June overturned Snyder's conviction and ruled that while federal law



prohibits bribes to state and local officials, it's not a crime for those officials to accept gratuities for past acts.

"It's always very rewarding when it's for an individual who's facing prison time," Blatt said. "And Snyder was just a lot of fun at oral argument. ... The argument was extremely colorful."

Blatt also notched her 50th argument before the Supreme Court while arguing on behalf of Starbucks Corp. last April, which she said was a milestone accomplishment because she was the first woman to reach that threshold — and because she was arguing on behalf of a company she loves.

Starbucks appealed to the Supreme Court in October 2023 after a split Sixth Circuit panel upheld an injunction sought by the National Labor Relations Board that forced the company to rehire seven workers it fired amid a union organizing drive at a Memphis, Tennessee, location in 2022. The justices last June ultimately ruled 8-1 in *Starbucks Corp. v. McKinney* that courts should strictly apply a four-factor test when the NLRB is seeking injunctions against employers accused of unfair labor practices. The following month, the Sixth Circuit sent the case back to Tennessee federal court, clearing the way for the NLRB to fight for a new injunction under the clarified standard.

Since the Starbucks arguments, Blatt said she has argued three other cases before the high court, bringing her current total to 53.

"I do think, you know, a big part of this, though, is the responsibility to try to make sure, when you have a large practice group like Williams & Connolly, other people are getting argument opportunities," Blatt said.

She noted, for example, that Amy Saharia and Sarah Harris — who was named in January to serve as acting U.S. solicitor general — "have just been killing it in the courts of appeals" and were given multiple opportunities to argue before the Supreme Court in recent years. Blatt also highlighted that Luke McCloud recently returned to Williams & Connolly after over a year at the U.S. Department of Justice as an assistant to the solicitor general.

In an interview, McCloud told Law360 he was drawn back to the firm for multiple reasons, including the mix of cases its attorneys can work on at both the trial and appellate levels.

"I think having one foot in the trial world and one foot in the appellate world makes me better at both," McCloud said. "I have a better handle on how to make arguments in a district court and preserve issues for appeal."

McCloud said he also feels an obligation to promote opportunities for younger lawyers, and particularly young associates, in the same way Blatt once did when pushing for him to make his first argument before the Supreme Court.

"There are not many people working in the Supreme Court bar that take as seriously the obligation to mentor and support younger lawyers as Lisa does," McCloud said. "And so ... I want to make sure that I'm helping the next generation of appellate attorneys who are coming up to do the same thing."

McCloud said another reason the appellate group is so successful is the time they spend thinking through the possible problems in a case and using "creative lawyering" to address those problems and make the issues seem relatable.

According to McCloud, the latter skill is something Blatt in particular specializes in.

"You read a Lisa brief, and you will see that she takes what can be a very abstract legal issue and makes it easy to understand using concrete real-world examples that I think often resonate with judges and justices," McCloud said. "And Lisa is a big part of that, but I think the younger people on our team, the associates working on the cases, are a big part of that as well."

Blatt said what makes her successful is that she's "not fearful of failure," which causes her to stay driven "and just continuing to want to share the pie."

"I think the more driven I am to try to get others to succeed, we tend to all succeed together," Blatt said. "I'm driven for the benefit of the firm and my partners. ... We all have different ways of motivating ourselves, and it's one way that's a big motivator for me."

--Additional reporting by Celeste Bott, Braden Campbell and Rae Ann Varona. Editing by Kristen Becker.