



Profile: Shaana Rahman

Trial lawyer pays her dues, makes her own success and shows others the way

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Practicing law is a labor of love for many attorneys, and with Shaana Rahman, the labor is unmistakable. She has put in the long hours, made the necessary sacrifices, paid her dues and dedicated herself – without reservations – to the role of advocate. Now, after nearly 17 years of developing herself into an accomplished civil trial attorney, she's ready to bear down and really make a commitment.

Not only is she continuing her tireless advocacy for those who have been injured or wronged – oftentimes to the tune of seven-figure verdicts or settlements – but now she also is filling the role of trial law guru, showing others how it's done.

“Part of what I get to do now is mentor law students and young lawyers, and I do that a lot with young women because I am pretty committed to seeing more women become trial lawyers,” said Rahman, the principal and founder of Rahman Law PC, based in San Francisco. “Now I have the luxury of being able to give back, to lend a hand to other women coming up, and it's something that's quite enjoyable for me to do now that I'm at this stage of my career.”

In a relatively short time, Rahman certainly has accomplished quite a lot. She's resolved hundreds of cases in and out of court. She is a member of the Multi-Million Dollar Advocates Forum, a nationwide group of trial lawyers who have achieved individual settlements and/or verdicts in excess of \$2 million. She has been named a Top 40-Under-40 attorney, a Top 100 Trial Lawyer and has been honored as a Preeminent Woman Lawyer by Martindale-Hubbell.

As a member of the San Francisco Trial Lawyers Association DIVERSITY COMMITTEE, Rahman created a fellowship program in which diverse law



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students are paired with Bay Area law firms during the summer to develop their trial litigation skills. It is now in its seventh year.

Indeed, Rahman's career seems to follow a theme that

combines a fundamental work ethic commonly found in her profession with an entrepreneurial slant that few in the law community can boast. In the end, she just wants her success to be her own, and starting a firm has been one pinnacle of that objective.

“I think when you're working for someone who's established in the profession, there's a certain element of 'Are you doing it on your own esteem or are you trading on this other guy's name who you work for?' For me, I had to see if I could do it on my own,” Rahman said. “The other part is the aspect of getting to know my clients and forming relationships with them and fighting for them because they're important to me. In a big firm, that wasn't always the nature of the business – you never get to choose your clients or give them a lot of time because of the volume of work you're doing. I really wanted to develop a different atmosphere, a different practice – one where people don't walk into a law firm and feel intimidated.

“I see the lawyer as being in the service industry,” she continued. “So I wanted to create that sort of environment so people can meet a lawyer and feel safe and secure and not like they're going into

some fancy place and being given a bunch of jargon they don't understand. I want my clients to participate in the process. That's what I kind of set out to do.”

Doing the job

These days, Rahman tries about one or two cases a year with the majority of her work involving bicycle or motorcycle injuries and deaths. She also does some legal malpractice cases and is known to take on public entities, cases that many of her colleagues shy away from because they're complicated and can be expensive. “But I find them fascinating,” she said.

While her personable approach works with most of the people she represents, Rahman realizes some cases don't lend themselves well to forming close attorney-client relationships. Not every case can be life-changing, she said, and at times it's just about being a voice for the voiceless and getting them restitution. “I think what we do is important because without personal injury lawyers, people would get screwed by insurance companies and corporations,” Rahman said. “But I think we have to be realistic about what justice is, and to me, if I have a case where I can make an impact on my client's life in some way and all I can do is get them money and be kind to them, then that's important. Some cases are just economics; they're small, and you get what you get, and it's not going to make that much of a difference in someone's life. But even with the small cases, I feel if you treat people with respect and you are professional, then you've done your job, and that's a good thing.”

Early inspiration

Rahman was raised by a single mother who once told her that her penchant for talking and arguing would



make her a good lawyer. So, the young Rahman decided early on that's what she wanted to be. As she grew older, she "started to see the injustices one sees when they're growing up," at which point she decided she wanted to make a difference – and law would be the way to do that.

The first time Rahman encountered a lawyer was when her mother was involved in a family will and trust dispute. The attorney took her mom's case pro bono and made an impression on the younger Rahman. "He worked so hard and was so compassionate – not just with the legal issues he was working on for her but also the other issues she was dealing with," Rahman recalled. "It was sort of inspiring. You know, when you're a kid, you think lawyers are super fancy. So when you get to meet one in person and you see they're just people too, that was kind of important and shaped what I thought I would do."

Rahman attended Santa Clara University on an academic scholarship and graduated with a degree in political science. She went on to University of San Francisco School of Law, where she graduated with distinction as a Public Interest Law Scholar. While in law school, she worked at a defense firm doing applicants' workers' compensation cases representing longshoremens, and that's how she got her love for injury work, she said.

When Rahman graduated from law school, that same firm offered her a job, and she went to work there for a little longer, trying her first case and becoming a workers' comp expert. But she didn't want to get pigeonholed, she said, and embarked on a job hunt that landed her at a large firm working insurance defense cases. That firm also was big on plaintiffs' practice, and soon Rahman was working on her first plaintiffs' case.

"Once I started doing plaintiffs' cases, it became apparent to me I couldn't do defense work anymore," she said. "In fact, the better I got at defense work, the worse I felt about myself." One

of her last defense cases went into arbitration against a young girl and her mom, who was blind with a guide dog. Rahman got a defense verdict in the arbitration, and the partners were thrilled with the big victory, she said. Rahman had a different reaction: "I thought to myself, 'I just literally stole money from a blind woman.' And that was the end for me."

Coming over to the plaintiff side

From there, Rahman landed a position with a high-profile plaintiffs' law firm, where she honed her skills and bided her time before breaking away to open her own practice. Of course there were obstacles to go along with the new venture, the first of which turned out to be a partnership with a family law attorney that just didn't work out. Once she made it past that bump, the biggest barrier became getting cases. "And that comes from building a reputation and getting to know people in the community and going outside of your box," Rahman said. "And meeting a bunch of people and networking and doing things that you might find uncomfortable like selling yourself."

Rahman not only did the necessary grunt work, but she also maintained the vision she had for her own firm.

Today, when she's going to trial, much of Rahman's approach varies with the type of case, but one general aspect that always holds true, she said, is determining the story she's going to tell the jury and how she's going to present all the facts in a vehicle that people understand. "It's about human interest – it's kind of why people like reality TV and the reason we like to read tell-all books," she said. "People want to hear the why – why people do things or how something happens – and if you can present it in a way where they can't wait to hear the next scene or chapter, then they're going to pay attention to your case."

Away from the office and the law, Rahman serves on the board of Walk San

Francisco, a pedestrian safety advocacy group, and enjoys riding her bicycle. She also recently delved into another industry completely unrelated to law. "I bought an olive farm outside of Paso Robles," she said. "Just enjoying life on the farm and learning how to grow olive trees and raise rabbits for breeding. It's my new venture.

"I've been a city girl my whole life, and if it tells you anything, I bought a farm during the worst drought in California history," she continued. "Every person I've met down here who farms, the first question they ask is 'Do you have a day job?'"

The day job is there – and will be for the foreseeable future. Rahman enjoys being an advocate and hopes to expand her practice at the firm's new office on the Central Coast.

And she certainly won't stop providing assistance and advice to younger lawyers. One of her most important musings is that there's a definite teacher-pupil process in becoming a lawyer – whether it's direct or indirect – and there's no fast track to success.

"You gotta pay your dues – start at the bottom and work your way up," she said. "You work hard, and you learn – take every opportunity you can to learn something new. Go watch trials, go meet older lawyers, ask them about their experiences, learn stuff. Because your first five years of practice, your learning curve is super steep, and you have to work hard to keep up and move forward just a little bit. If you're not doing the work, you're not going to learn.

"People talk about work-life balance, and that's great if you can pull it off," Rahman added. "But there's a reality: If you want to be a trial lawyer, you have to learn to work really hard. There are going to be a lot of sacrifices because that's the nature of this business."

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