

MVP: King & Spalding's Ursula Henninger

Law360 (December 10, 2018, 3:10 PM EST) -- Ursula Henninger of King & Spalding LLP pulled out trial wins for R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. in multiple suits this past year brought by former smokers who said the company intentionally hooked them and caused them injury, making her one of Law360's 2018 Trials MVPs.

HER BIGGEST SUCCESS THIS YEAR:

Henninger said the biggest feather in her cap was her defense win in *Mobley v. RJR*, which took place in Key West, Florida. It's considered a challenging district because it has a reputation for being a "liberal and free-going area," Henninger said. But when she did her homework, she found that Key West's permanent residents were mostly military and hardworking, non-salaried tourism industry folks. Henninger believes that relating to these jurors made all the difference in defeating claims that RJR bore responsibility for Leonard Mobley's death from lung cancer.

"It was in a jurisdiction where nobody had tried a tobacco case. They found the plaintiff was a member of the Engle class, but they assigned 95 percent of the responsibility to the smoker and then awarded zero in money," Henninger said.

Her success came in part from "researching and learning the jurisdiction so that I could relate to the people that were in the jury box, and ended up doing so. It was my most successful chameleon, so to speak," Henninger said.

WHY SHE'S A TRIAL LAWYER:

Henninger said it comes down to personality and temperament, and that, in a way, trial lawyering is just another form of onstage delivery.

"In high school, it was either actor, rock star or trial lawyer. And I cannot sing a note," Henninger said. "I wanted to be a trial lawyer when I was in high school, but I never realized that there were other kinds of



Ursula Henninger
King & Spalding

lawyers. Even after she found out about desk-jockey lawyers, Henninger wanted to be “someone who was in court. That’s what drew me to it,” she said.

Henninger also noted that her firm, doing as many tobacco defense projects as it does, is a great proving ground for trial lawyers.

It’s “large-scale litigation in [a firm] where people go to trial all the time,” Henninger said. “Tobacco litigation affords that ability to lawyers, and it also affords associates chances” to play important trial roles early on.

WHAT MOTIVATES HER:

Henninger said she always strives to be the best. Everything else one can achieve or amass is a form of that, she said.

“I think that it probably all boils down to competitiveness. There’s money, there’s career satisfaction, but I think my mom will tell you [competitiveness] was a trait of mine before I even knew it was. Not in a bad way; not in the sense that I’ll cut someone’s throat to advance my career. [But] there is a competitive nature to all trial work,” she said.

HER ADVICE FOR JUNIOR ATTORNEYS:

“My advice to junior attorneys would be to continue to strive to get the opportunities that you need to advance your career. If you want to be a trial lawyer, get in court, get to be a third chair, get to be a second chair, take depositions,” Henninger said.

The only time when asking for an opportunity can come off as pestering is when the person asking hasn’t earned the level below that opportunity, she said. So Henninger believes in asking often for incremental opportunities — don’t shoot the moon.

— As told to Cara Salvatore

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 2018 MVP winners after reviewing nearly 1,000 submissions.