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## MVP: Lief Cabraser's Kelly Dermody

By **Matt Perez**

Law360 (October 2, 2023, 4:34 PM EDT) -- Kelly Dermody of Lief Cabraser Heimann & Bernstein LLP, who doubles as the firm's managing partner in San Francisco, notched one of the largest discrimination settlements in U.S. history this year in a decade-long case against Goldman Sachs, earning her a spot as one of **Law360's 2023 Class Action MVPs**.





Kelly Dermody

Lieff Cabraser

Her biggest accomplishment this past year:

In what she calls her career case, Dermody co-led a 13-year-long gender discrimination class action against Goldman Sachs to a historic **\$215 million settlement** — the largest gender bias settlement made in advance of employees winning their case at trial.

"It's an incredibly significant case involving such an important player in financial services and frankly the American business economy," Dermody said. "And it's a kind of case that really reflects the courage and tenacity of clients ... You go to law school to serve clients like that."

Her biggest challenge this past year:

Diversity, equity and inclusion programs that corporations rolled out following protests in 2020 demanding racial justice in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police have more recently been slashed and cut from budgets — while a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in June effectively ended the use of affirmative action in college admissions.

Dermody points to this growing "backlash" to DEI programs as her most difficult challenge as a civil rights litigator.

"[It's] really put corporate America on its heels, and also inhibited some of the more courageous people in corporate America from stepping out and being champions of the change that's needed to make our workplaces truly fair and equitable," she said. "That's been really sad to watch and concerning because litigation can only do so much. You need to have a lot of good actors inside companies that drive change, and it feels like a very bad moment for those actors to do that."

### Why she picked class action:

Dermody specifically entered law school to do racial justice work. During her first summers, she worked at both the NAACP Legal Defense Fund — working primarily on police misconduct cases — and the Civil Rights Division at the U.S. Department of Justice — focusing on housing discrimination.

Her life goal was not private plaintiff's work when joining Lief Cabraser, but calling it "dumb luck" where she landed, Dermody was still able to do the type of work she set her sights on during law school.

"Here I am, 29 years later, I've gotten to do that work, and it's so fulfilling and motivating and inspiring," she said. "My clients get me out of bed every day. I feel so, so lucky to be a lawyer and to get to work in this practice."

### Her advice to young attorneys:

While she scored a major win this year in the case against Goldman Sachs, Dermody acknowledges how difficult it is to resolve civil rights actions, saying new attorneys must grow "thick skin."

"Every single possible odd is stacked against you," she said. "The law is unfortunately not designed to make equity accessible. It's not meant to disrupt the systems that it operates in. So the nature of the work is very much an uphill challenge."

Dermody advised against the expectation that an upstart can stack wins early and easily. Instead, attorneys should embrace the grind for their clients.

"It is really tough, and you can burn out, and you can get really bummed out in this area if you don't kind of have the mentality of, 'I'm just going to keep grinding, and over the long haul, I'm going to stack wins, and they're going to be meaningful, and my clients are going to get justice.'"

### Other notable cases:

While not her usual area of employment law, Dermody is involved in litigation related to tort and personal injury. In January 2023, plaintiff Tamara Bryant alleged her uterine cancer was caused by regular use of hair relaxer products created by a number of major companies, including L'Oreal.

The target market for such products are Black women, who have a "tortured and upsetting history in American culture in terms of the relationship between changing the texture and look and the features of Black people and Black hair in order to meet a standard of professional or beauty that has been anti-Black for hundreds of years," Dermody said.

She added, "It's been incredibly compelling to work on this case from the many layers that it has — but also personally it's felt very important to me as a leader of the team at my firm and as a white woman to make sure the focus is on the experience of Black women, that our team has a lot of Black women in it, [and] we are co-counseled with a Black female-led civil rights organization, so that all our work has a racial-justice lens."

*--As told to Matt Perez*

*Law360's MVPs of the Year 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 2023 MVP winners after reviewing more than 900 submissions.*

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