
They've Got Next: The 40 Under 40 - Nana Wilberforce of WilmerHale

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Age: 38

Law Firm: Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale & Dorr

Practice Area: Antitrust

Title: Partner

Location: Los Angeles

Law School: Columbia Law School

Disclosing to AI

Please describe two of your most substantial, recent wins in practice.

In 2019, the Justice Department conducted merger reviews for ten different cannabis transactions, and I represented clients in four of them. I represented two companies, Harvest Health & Recreation and PharmaCann, for whom we secured antitrust clearance for deals ranging up to \$850 million in value.

Each of these transactions proceeded through the Justice Department's comprehensive request for additional information or "Second Request" process. The transactions presented novel issues, including consideration of state licensing processes and potential conflicts between state and federal law. In a rapidly changing industry where deal values could rapidly change, we were happy to be able to quickly secure clearance for the companies.

I was part of the team who helped secure merger approval for the \$26 billion combination of T-Mobile and Sprint. The matter was incredibly multi-faceted, but my work focused on our engagement with state attorneys general to understand and address state-specific concerns about the transaction.

This work led up to a historic antitrust trial brought by 13 state attorneys general to enjoin the merger that we successfully defended. It was a wonderful transaction to work on because it was particularly consequential to daily life—bringing 5G network access to more Americans.

What is the most important lesson you learned as a first-year attorney and how does it inform your practice today?

I have had this little paperweight in my office since I was a first year that says, “If you do little things well, you’ll do big ones better.” I have found this to be a critical reminder in the practice of law for two reasons.

First, excellent representation builds on the small stuff—understanding the facts, understanding the case law, understanding the political landscape—so it’s really important to focus on those small things first and work on building expertise step by step in those areas

Second, practicing law is a client-service focused profession and those little things—such as providing a client with talking points for a business-facing meeting or a meeting with their supervisor—are the things that clients appreciate the most.

I also found that this was some of the best advice I held onto as a first-year generation and first-year attorney because it allowed me to avoid getting overwhelmed in an environment in which I was unfamiliar

This advice has also resonated with me much more after becoming a parent. Each small developmental step is special and important and critical for subsequent growth. And approaching the law with childlike curiosity and openness can often lead to novel solutions for clients.

How do you define success in your practice?

Success in my practice is helping clients accomplish their business goals in a manner that reduces risk. My practice involves a significant amount of counseling work, either following an acute antitrust issue that necessitates remediation, or because of the recently ever-changing antitrust enforcement landscape.

As a result, I am constantly working with my clients to ensure that they remain compliant with the antitrust laws in ways that reduce risk but work within the current framework and structure of their businesses. Success is helping them do just that. I always seek to make recommendations that function within the business and that are individualized to the extent possible.

I also believe this type of work requires a certain level a creativity and that the best creative ideas are developed by a team. Being successful necessitates being part of a wonderful team and I am lucky to be part of one. The partners and associates on my team are strategic thinkers, hard workers, and come from diverse backgrounds, which is a formula that I believe creates the highest level of excellence.

What are ou most proud of as a lawyer?

I was honored to be selected for the Pickering Fellowship at WilmerHale, which meant that I was able to work full-time for six months at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. It was an incredible experience where I was able to work on the most important civil rights work of our time.

I was able to work on litigation challenging photo ID laws in Alabama, help sisters who were being penalized at their high school for having braided hair, and engage in election protection for a crucial congressional race. The breadth of the experience and the ability to do direct service legal work with the nation’s best civil rights lawyers was an experience I continue to cherish.

My pro bono experiences have been my most cherished experiences because of the personal nature of them. For example, in 2017 I was able to partner with the Children’s Law Center and represent a woman in a guardianship turned adoption. Having a hand in helping a child reach a safe and loving home, was something that I will cherish forever

Currently, I am working alongside The Legal Aid Society on a wrongful conviction matter. This has been one of the most difficult cases I have ever worked on, and likely the one I will be most proud of if we can reach a positive resolution

Who is your greatest mentor in the law and what have they taught you?

My greatest mentor in the law is Judge Maame Ewusi-Mensah Frimpong of the US District Court for the Central District of California. I’ve been honored to see her career evolve over the years but first encountered her excellence and leadership while I was an extern at the Department of Justice, Consumer Protection Branch where she was Deputy Assistant Attorney General

I saw her lead cutting-edge criminal and civil matters related to food, consumer goods, and financial fraud. But I also had the honor of seeing her lead a team of people during the October 2013 government shutdown.

When you hear about a government shutdown, you do not always consider the individuals and their families who are not receiving paychecks, some while still working. Judge Frimpong never forgot that and gracefully supported her team while continuing to drive mission-essential casework, and as a result, I always strive to understand my teammates as lawyers and as individuals.

Judge Frimpong has also had a varying career in private practice and public service and is a shining example of the transition between the two. Today, she brings those varying perspectives and experiences to her role as a judicial decision-maker, which allows her to be fair and open in her fact-finding and legal analysis.

My practice often requires consideration of a number of factors and stakeholders, so I strive to bring that perspective to my work as well.

Tell us your two favorite songs on your summer music playlist

Beyoncé, “Cozy,” and Kendrick Lamar, “Not Like Us.”

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