

40

They've Got Next: the 40 Under 40

40

GJ Ligelis Jr. of Cravath, Swaine & Moore

Lisa Helem, Executive Editor | MP McQueen, Editor | July 25, 2024

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

I represented AerCap in its \$30 billion acquisition of GE Capital Aviation Services from General Electric, the largest M&A deal in the history of the aircraft leasing industry and one that led to AerCap becoming the global industry leader. The transaction pulled in every facet of Cravath's corporate practice, from M&A to finance to corporate governance to antitrust/regulatory, and I helped ensure that AerCap's board of directors received seamless legal advice across all areas.

I also represented Just Eat Takeaway.com in its \$7.3 billion combination with Grubhub. Not only was the transaction cross-border, but the path to signing took place during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in the US and Europe, requiring innovative and flexible approaches to deal execution. I'm particularly proud of my role as sole M&A partner on this deal, which I led in only my third year as a partner.

Similarly, I am again acting as the sole M&A partner in my current representation of the independent directors of UScellular in connection with the pending \$4.4 billion sale of UScellular's wireless operations and select spectrum assets to T-Mobile US, continuing to build my practice advising boards of directors on their most significant and challenging transactions.

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

To me, the most important lesson for first-year corporate associates to learn is to cultivate a true sense of ownership over your own work, the transaction at large and the relationship with the client.

It is all too easy to rely on the more experienced associates and partners above you on a deal team and view your own role as just a "cog in the wheel" pulling together information or data points for someone else to form an interpretation or recommendation.

Each team member plays a critical role in enabling the firm overall to deliver the quality of advice that our clients expect. Our first-year associates spot issues, craft creative solutions and help bridge gaps on issues before they escalate—all in areas they are uniquely versed in and connected to, given the tasks on their plate. The key is to both fully accept that as part of your job description and to have the confidence to play that role for the team.

In practice, that means that you're treating every piece of work product you send along as if it is going directly to the client without anyone else's review. At the end of the day, clients need answers, recommendations, and solutions—not questions, ambiguities, and issues. If you embrace that mentality from the start, you'll continue to practice that way throughout your career.



GJ Ligelis Jr.

Age: 40

Law Firm: Cravath, Swaine & Moore

Practice Area: Mergers & Acquisitions

Title: Partner

Location: New York

Law School: Harvard Law School

CRAVATH

How do you define success in your practice?

Success to me is having clients who want to pick up the phone and call you with any matter they need help on, large or small. In order to get that phone call, the client has to value your experience and expertise, trust your judgment and advice and, most importantly, really like working with you. If any of those elements are not present, that call is going to go to someone else—and in some circumstances, it can take months or years to gradually pull them all together.

Nothing makes me happier than when my relationships with clients cross that line from professional connections to personal friendships. This is an intense job not only for the lawyers but also for our clients, and those moments on transactions when you have each other's backs and push through together to get the result can be the foundation of some long-lasting and fulfilling friendships.

What are you most proud of as a lawyer?

While I am, of course, proud of my own personal achievements at this stage of my career, I honestly am even more proud of my firm, my partners and everyone else who makes up the incredible institution at which I have the privilege of working. Delivering the very best legal advice is not just about the individual lawyer—it's about a team of people with a wide range of expertise working together to help the client achieve their objectives.

As someone who played team sports my entire life, I feel incredibly fortunate to have found a professional home that replicates the experience I had on the football field, track, or soccer field. Every day we practice and improve together, we go out and compete together and we win or lose together.

I am the best lawyer I can be by being surrounded by talented people who all take the same approach to their practice, and I enjoy helping them and their clients wherever I can just as much as I enjoy working on my own transactions and clients.

Nothing is more rewarding than introducing an M&A client to one of my litigation or investigations partners, capital markets partners or antitrust/ regulatory partners and watching my client's reaction as they realize they get the exact same level of quality, dedication, and personal touch across every area of Cravath.

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

My M&A partner Mark Greene has been my closest mentor at Cravath from day one. When I was a first-year associate, partner mentors were randomly assigned to us, and I was truly fortunate to get paired up with Mark. Fifteen years later, Mark and I work in the same M&A group and cover many of the same clients together.

The best example I can give for the impact that Mark has had on my career is the number of times I realize I am simply quoting things that he once told me as I give advice to younger lawyers—from younger partners to first-year associates to summer associate applicants. He is one of those rare individuals who leads just as effectively by example as he does from hands-on advice and guidance.

He has helped shape a whole generation of younger partners at Cravath as we each build out our practices and take up the mantle of keeping the Cravath name at the very pinnacle of the legal profession, which requires both preserving what is unique about the firm while evolving it to meet new demands. He teaches all of us that we are just caretakers of our client relationships, both those that we inherited from others like Mark, and those that we grew ourselves.

Tell us your two favorite songs on your summer music playlist.

The Band - "Ophelia" and Bright Eyes - "First Day of My Life." I've always listened to a broad mix of classic rock and indie rock, and at least for me, these two bands are the best of the best!