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PERSPECTIVE

LA lawyer honored for role in bringing down Weinstein

By Malcolm MacLachlan

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SAN FRANCISCO — Attorneys for disgraced movie producer Harvey Weinstein have been defending him from sexual assault charges in criminal court in Los Angeles for nearly a month. On Saturday night in San Francisco, the Consumer Attorneys of California honored an attorney who helped put him there.

The group gave Genie E. Harrison its 2022 Consumer Attorney of the Year award for representing several of Weinstein's alleged victims. In a complaint filled with lurid details, the founder of the Genie Harrison Law Firm in Los Angeles sued the producer and the Weinstein Co. LLC on behalf of his former assistant, Sandeep Rehal, claiming sexual harassment and retaliation.

After what she described as two years of harassment and abuse, Rehal was a key source in the 2017 New York Times article that broke open the Weinstein story and helped inspire the new film, "She Said." Harrison later refiled the case in *New York State Court. Rehal v. Weinstein*, 1:18-cv-00674-JMF (S.D. N.Y., filed Jan. 25, 2018). When the Weinstein Co. filed for bankruptcy, Harrison helped Rehal and four other victims win compensation as unsecured creditors.

Speaking to the audience at the Palace Hotel, Harrison said the shame and trauma of sexual violence leads victims to stay quiet.

"These are the consequences that led many women not to come forward about Harvey Weinstein,



Genie Harrison and Gregory Rizio. | Photo courtesy of Rick Kramer

one of the most prolific rapists that I have ever heard of," Harrison said. "They didn't come forward until the brave journalists Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey were able to convince people to start speaking up."

Reached on Monday, Harrison also pointed to the defense tactics faced by Gov. Gavin Newsom's wife, Jennifer Siebel Newsom, when she testified Weinstein raped her during a 2005 business meeting. In his opening argument, Mark Werksman called Siebel Newsom "just another bimbo who slept with Harvey Weinstein to get ahead in

Hollywood." During cross-examination last week, he asked her to reenact a faked orgasm she testified she had used to try to stop the alleged attack.

"The wife of the governor of the state of California is being treated this way, as a person who is a survivor of sexual abuse by Harvey Weinstein," Harrison said. "Of course the women and others who have been victimized in different cases look at this and question whether they're going to be willing to come forward."

The night also had lighter moments. Last year, Gregory G. Rizio

roasted incoming President Craig M. Peters in a video that lightly mocked him for being earnest and uptight. Peters lampooned himself on Saturday, in a video that showed him reenacting the famous opening sequence from "Forrest Gump," this time on a bench outside the Capitol in Sacramento. This gave him a chance to review his accomplishments during what ended up being a very productive year for the organization. The biggest piece in the "box of chocolates" was the culmination of a decadeslong effort to raise the noneconomic damages

cap under the Medical Injury Compensation Reform Act of 1975.

Then it was Rizio's turn as he prepares to take the role on Dec. 1. In a video, Rizio tells his co-workers he knows they're going to roast him this year and "whatever you say, it's not going to hurt my feelings." But they prove him wrong by using a chart to explain that he's neither likable nor interesting enough to roast.

The group also gave outgoing Assemblyman Mark Stone, D-Scotts Valley, its lifetime achievement award. Peters told the crowd,

"There's a lot of heartache in this room" because Stone opted not to run for his final two years under the state term limits law. Stone and Sen. Tom Umberg, D-Santa Ana, used their roles as Judiciary Committee chairs to stop a State Bar effort this year to expand the practice of law by nonattorneys. Umberg gave the lunchtime keynote on Saturday.

Four attorneys with the Long Beach firms Lallande Law, Casillas & Associates and Gastélum Law were honored as the Street Fighters of the Year for suing the LA County

sheriff's department on behalf of a prisoner killed by a violent mentally ill cellmate who was supposed to be kept separate from other prisoners. *Alarcio v. County of Los Angeles*, 2:20-cv-00514-FMO-MRW (C.D. Cal., filed Jan. 17, 2020).

Elizabeth Hernandez, an associate with the Dordick Law Corp. in Beverly Hills, won the Robert E. Cartwright Sr. Award "in recognition of excellence in trial advocacy and dedication to teaching trial advocacy." Siannah Collado with SC Law in Hermosa Beach won the Women's Caucus Consumer

Advocate Award for mentoring female attorneys.

Two past presidents were recognized with awards given for years of service to the organization. Elise Sanguinetti, founding partner of Arias Sanguinetti Wang & Torrijos in Emeryville, won the Marvin E. Lewis Award, while Cotchett, Pitre & McCarthy partner Niall McCarthy won the Edward I. Pollock Award.

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