



# Profile: Sarah London

## From organizing a fifth-grade walkout to hammering away at Big Tobacco, no fight is too big or small

By **STEPHEN ELLISON**

She's known in some circles as "The Big Hammer," and she relishes the moniker. But Sarah London hasn't let it go to her head.

The partner with Lief Cabraser became a fighter against unfair practices at a very young age and says to this day her job is all about leveling the playing field and bringing injustices to light. Those battles have included taking on Big Tobacco, Big Pharma and Big Auto, and London does it with a certain underlying humility that makes her borderline heroic.

"I remember giving my first opening statement, then calling my mom in tears and saying this is the greatest privilege of my life," London recalled. "It was everything I hoped to do.

"As the first in my family to go to graduate school, I was just grateful for all the opportunities that my parents and their parents and their parents gave to me, with all their hard work and beliefs in doing what you love and fighting for what's right."

Oddly enough, London's journey began in elementary school; fifth grade, to be precise. Her teacher had instituted a policy that girls could not play eraser tag, and that did not sit right with the young Sarah London.

"Our teacher determined the girls were slowing down the game, so we were left to simply watch the game rather than play it. That seemed unjust to me," London said. "I organized a walkout, and we went to the principal's office and had a sit-in until the eraser tag scandal was resolved. It was one of those experiences, though, where it wasn't easy because you're being told you're spoiling the fun, and they're going to take it away. But for me, from a very early age, I was always



London

drawn to the fight on behalf of the victims or the people who were getting the short end of the stick."

### **From union organizer to Planned Parenthood**

The fight continued after college, when London became a union organizer in Missouri on behalf of domestic and home health care workers who were fighting for a living wage and fighting for "dignity in their work," she said. She found the work extremely rewarding and compelling and carried that into working for Planned Parenthood in Kansas, where she helped low-income women seeking affordable and accessible women's health care services. It was there she discovered the power of the law.

"During my time as a lobbyist and organizer and public policy manager at Planned Parenthood, I interfaced a lot with legislators, and certainly on the issues I cared about there was a great deal of legal analysis and language of power

that derived from the law," London recalled. "So, I decided to go to law school to become conversant with the language of power and be able to come back into the community and use that language and that position and privilege and power to help those who don't have as much access or a voice."

She attended UC Berkeley law school, where she said she had an extraordinary experience. While there, London considered working in labor law and going back into the unions, but it turned out, much to her surprise, she really enjoyed and "felt energized" by litigation. She started doing research on area plaintiffs' firms for her summers. It wasn't easy at that time to find or learn about plaintiffs' side work, she said. At the UC Berkeley career office, she asked about what kind of law she could practice to help the less fortunate, and she remembered the staff person opening a drawer and pulling out a typewritten "ditto" sheet of paper with six plaintiffs' firms listed on it. London went through the list and looked them all up. "Most of the firms weren't even around anymore," she said, and then there was Lief Cabraser.

"I looked it up on the web and was just blown away and thought this is exactly what I want to do," she said. "Fortunately, I got a chance to work there as a summer associate, and it was just absolutely the right fit in terms of the kind of work, representing those with fewer accesses to resources, those who face significant battles and hurdles achieving a fair shot at justice. ... It was the absolute right fit for me and why I wanted to go into law."

### **Tobacco and pharma cases**

Early in her career, London teamed up with the partners at Lief Cabraser litigating tobacco cases in Florida. A class had been certified in trial on the wrongful conduct of the tobacco industry, and the jury had



reached its final verdict in 2000. After a long journey up and down through the various appellate courts, the cases were remanded and ready to go to trial on behalf of individuals and their families who had suffered injuries as a result of their addiction to cigarettes, London said. Lief Cabraser represented several thousand of the families, and London was part of the trial teams, ultimately becoming lead trial counsel on upwards of 15 of the cases, she said.

She also went to trial on class cases in the Norvir litigation that involved price fixing on the HIV/AIDS drug. A group of pharmacies alleged Abbott Laboratories had monopolized the market for HIV medicines used in conjunction with Abbott's prescription drug, Norvir. London worked extensively on the case's trial preparation, researching and drafting motions, jury instructions and trial stipulations until the case settled during trial for \$52 million.

In discussing her typical trial strategy, London described a process that in essence begins with the end.

"I always start with the jury instructions and build my closing argument first, so I know where I'm headed, where I want to get to," she said. "Then I work backwards from there. With every opening, I want to under-promise and over-deliver and make sure I know what evidence is coming in and how it's coming in. In terms of building the narrative throughout the case, it's important to me to start with the wrongful conduct of the company and develop the concepts and the big picture of what's at stake and then develop a narrative, so that towards the end of the trial, we're focusing on what happened to the individual who was harmed or affected."

### **Pride of the 'Big Hammer'**

One of her more memorable moments as a trial lawyer came in the middle of a heated argument in one of the tobacco cases she was working on, she said. During that argument, London

### **REDIRECT**

- **Getaway Spot:** Kauai
- **Go-To Music or Artist:** Aretha Franklin
- **Recommended Reading:** Anything by Jhumpha Lahiri
- **Dream Job:** Documentary filmmaker
- **Words to Live By:** "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." – **Margaret Mead**

heard the judge and defense counsel both refer to her as the "Big Hammer."

"When I take a look back, I'm a relatively junior woman with a lot of fire and brimstone, but certainly not the kind of resources you would see from a tobacco company," she said, chuckling. "And to have this experience where you're told you're a big hammer. That was very memorable, and I'm very proud of that name. And my colleagues have since given me a big hammer" to symbolize the moment.

Another memorable moment came when London went with a mourning mother to testify in front of an FDA advisory panel. The woman had lost her 19-year-old daughter to a pulmonary embolism from what London's team alleged was an undisclosed risk in the birth control drug Yaz, which the younger woman had been taking. The panel was studying the safety of the drug and whether it should be pulled from the market or needed greater warnings added.

"That grieving mother was in the lowest points of her life but was still determined to not let her daughter die in vain, and she became an advocate and activist on these issues," London said. "And for me to have the opportunity to help her amplify her voice and make a difference is truly memorable and exactly what I went into this (profession) for."

In addition to her success litigating against large tobacco and pharmaceutical companies, London also worked on several recent environmental disaster cases,

including litigation against Plains All American Pipeline after a 2015 oil spill in Santa Barbara, and two important class action cases on behalf of homeowners and businesses that suffered economic damages from the massive Porter Ranch gas leak that started in October 2015 and lasted into February 2016.

### **Power of network, and play**

London attributes much of her success to the partners at Lief Cabraser who supported and mentored her. She said the firm gave her the room and opportunity to develop as a young lawyer and for building a career she could be excited about and very proud of. That fortune includes other women professionals in her network who she referred to as her "rock and sounding boards and cheerleaders and confidants."

"It's impossible to do this work on your own, without the support of mentors and friends and family and colleagues and the community of plaintiffs trial lawyers we have," London said. "I have to give credit broadly to those who supported me along the way, and certainly my husband, who's been tremendously supportive and helpful as we raise three young kids. I couldn't have done it without him."

When London is not bringing down the hammer in the courtroom, she loves to dance and has been taking dance classes. She's also an adventurous eater, she said, always willing to try out new restaurants and unique foods. And, as many adults do, she has clung to one activity that always made her happy in her youth.

"I was a figure skater when I grew up," she said. "So, when I get the time, I still like to lace them up."

Finally, as a mother of three young children, London spends most of her spare time venturing and exploring and playing with them in the magnificent outdoors of the Bay Area.

For young lawyers and those aspiring to become lawyers, especially on the



plaintiffs' side, London said assertiveness and self-motivation are key.

"Say yes," she said. "Say yes to early opportunities. Don't be shy about asking for and receiving opportunities to try cases and to work on complicated and messy issues. Say yes as often and as early

as you can to build your breadth and depth of experience that can help give you the confidence and the wide-ranging experience you need to be a successful plaintiffs' lawyer.

"And don't give up on your life," she continued. "Go live a big, full, happy life

because you need the stamina and energy to do this work. So, don't feel like you have to give anything up."

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