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AM LAW LITIGATION DAILY

# Litigation Leaders: Zuckerman Spaeder's Caroline Judge Mehta on Leading a Law Firm After Heading an In-House Legal Department

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**W**elcome to another edition of our *Litigation Leaders* series, featuring the litigation practice leaders at some of the biggest and most innovative law firms in the country.

Meet **Caroline Judge Mehta**, the chair of **Zuckerman Spaeder**, who is based in Washington, D.C. She returned to the firm in 2022 after a two-year stint as General Counsel and Chief Legal Counsel at technology client **Afiniti**. Mehta served as co-chair alongside **Dwight Bostwick** starting in late 2023 and she took over as sole chair on Jan. 1.

**Lit Daily: Tell us a little about yourself—perhaps even a thing or two your partners would be surprised to learn about you.**

For starters, while being a litigator requires excellent brief writing skills, in my spare time, I prefer to write essays or poetry, forms of expression where I can make more ample use of adjectives.

A second surprise (though not much of one if you know us) is that our family's welcome mat reads, "I Hope You Like Taylor Swift." I frequently reminisce about the Eras Tour.

Lastly, my husband and I are preparing to send our eldest child off to college, and that will be a profound transition after the many happy and



Courtesy photo

## Caroline Judge Mehta of Zuckerman Spaeder.

harried years of parenting our daughter and son. In some ways, it's the perfect time to take on a new challenge in this role as chair.

**You returned to Zuckerman Spaeder in 2022 after serving as General Counsel and Chief Legal Counsel at multi-national technology company Afiniti for two years. What did you learn from that experience in-house that is helping you in your role as chair of the firm?**

My in-house experience was an illuminating adventure—it was a fast-paced environment filled with challenges on a global scale. It gave me significant insight into the challenges faced

by companies navigating complex regulatory landscapes and how outside counsel can most effectively contribute to a corporate client's success. In-house counsel are an integral part of a business and need to truly understand that business, manage its risks and support its goals day in and day out. As outside counsel, we often get called in when there is a crisis, and that requires building a deep knowledge of the facts around that crisis, but we may miss the larger context in which the specific business and industry operates. The most effective outside counsel build both depth and breadth of knowledge about the client's business and bring that knowledge to bear in each matter or issue facing the company.

While I already knew this to be the case, being in the position of hiring outside counsel drove home for me the value and effectiveness that Zuckerman Spaeder brings to its clients. We pride ourselves on personal and collaborative engagement. We staff matters leanly; each team member brings exceptional litigation skills and understands the client's goals. We do not have layers of attorneys that run the risk of increasing billable hours with minimal return for the client.

As a general counsel, I became a very discerning consumer of outside counsel resources. Value, trust, relationships and results are the hallmarks of great outside counsel, and I returned to a firm that embodies them.

**You served as co-chair of the firm alongside Dwight Bostwick prior to taking on the role as sole chair at the turn of the year. How is it different now that you are tackling the role on your own?**

The co-chair year was invaluable. Despite my longevity with the firm, there was (and still is) so much to learn and absorb in order to run the firm successfully. Dwight has been a tremendous mentor and friend throughout this process, and I have received incredible support from the entire partnership.

Since the year began, I have spent more time contemplating how best to position the firm for

long-term strength and success, and with that, I have taken on the lion's share of day-to-day management decision-making and duties. But I have the backing and support of a strong executive committee, partnership board and partnership.

In the years ahead, we will remain focused on what has driven our success. We will continue to cultivate long-term client relationships, demand the highest level of excellence from ourselves, advance our use of technology in service to our clients and support the growth of our incredibly talented junior attorneys.

While we work to cultivate the next generation of firm leaders and empowered and effective lawyers, I continue to reflect upon my time as an associate at Zuckerman Spaeder. In those early years of my career, I benefited from the mentorship of firm leaders like **Bill Taylor**, who took a strong interest in my growth as a litigator and taught me so much about advocacy and client relationships. As I take the reins of firm leadership, I aim to maintain this important firm tradition.

Zuckerman Spaeder's 50 years of success has been rooted in this team-based approach to both client service and firm management, and there's no doubt it will continue to underpin the firm's future success.

**How big is the firm and where are most of your litigators concentrated geographically?**

We have just over 80 attorneys who are barred around the country and located across four U.S. offices. The majority of our litigators are based in Washington, D.C., where the firm was founded in 1975—50 years ago this October. This anchor in the nation's capital, combined with our broader footprint, gives us both the national platform and the local insight needed to take on complex matters across a wide range of jurisdictions.

**What do you see as hallmarks of Zuckerman Spaeder litigators? What makes you different?**

We are serious about our commitment to creating a collaborative work environment and putting client success ahead of individual achievement. We set ego aside and keep a

single-minded focus on achieving for our clients.

We attract the most talented graduates and law clerks who seek substantive experience and training early in their careers. We invest in ensuring our associates build the skills required of first-chair lawyers. Many of our partners have previously served in government, as former prosecutors, public defenders, counsel to congressional staff and federal agencies. We bring that breadth of experience to our advocacy for clients in some of the most complex and consequential legal battles across the country.

We do not hesitate to take cases to trial where necessary, and I am certain that we achieve better resolutions in both the criminal and civil contexts because our adversaries know our trial skills and record of results. Many of our competitors, among whom we count some of the biggest firms in the AmLaw 200, tout their stand-up courtroom experience. But, despite our size, I am convinced that you'd be hard-pressed to find a firm that handles trials with the consistency and success of Zuckerman Spaeder.

We also have an exceptionally high retention rate of lawyers and professional staff, which tells me that we're getting it right.

**What were two or three of the firm's biggest in-court wins in the past year, and can you cite tactics that exemplify your firm's approach to success?**

We've been leading multiple insurance coverage cases on behalf of Lloyd's of London and other insurers, and we recently received conclusive rulings in Ohio and California that protected our clients from a \$200 million payout. Notably, Zuckerman Spaeder led the overall effort, which involved several insurance companies and law firms. Our attorneys are adept at collaborating and building effective teams and as a result, they

are often called upon to play leadership roles in multiparty cases.

While our firm is known for the kind of high-stakes litigation represented by those insurance cases, we also have a strong commitment to taking on difficult battles for those facing institutional injustice. Our team's work on behalf of former NFL players led the League to dismantle a benefits system that advantaged former white players over former Black players.

For many years, we have been deeply involved in the fight on behalf of former Boy Scouts seeking compensation for horrific sexual abuse dating back decades and have secured substantial monetary awards for the firm's clients over the past year.

We have a team that leads a one-of-its-kind national legal battle for mental health parity. We employ novel legal theories and have achieved some critical wins on behalf of tens of thousands of individuals.

**What does the firm's coming trial calendar look like?**

We are anticipating a busy trial calendar with clients on both sides of the "v." More than a quarter of our lawyers are preparing for trials scheduled to take place between now and next fall. These include several consequential cases in venues across the country, including representing CVS in a trial that is part of the firm's lead role in the sprawling opioid multi-district litigation, a relationship which has spanned nearly a decade.

Our litigators are also headed to trial in a civil RICO case, bringing a federal class action on behalf of refugees from an African country and representing law firms in matters related to breach of joint venture and fiduciary duty and fraud. As we look to next year, we're already anticipating scheduling orders in several other matters.