

# THE AM LAW LITIGATION DAILY

## Litigation Leaders: Quinn Emanuel's Michael Carlinsky on Training Associates to Think and Act Like Trial Lawyers

By Ross Todd  
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Welcome 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 **Michael Carlinsky**, the global co-managing partner of **Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan**, who is based in New York. Carlinsky and fellow co-managing partner **William "Bill" Burck**, who is based in Washington, D.C., took on formal management roles back in 2022 alongside firm co-founder and longtime managing partner **John Quinn**, who is now the firm's chairman. In addition to the firmwide role, Carlinsky serves as Quinn Emanuel's chair of complex litigation and co-chair of its insurance litigation practice. Carlinsky is a three-time *Litigator of the Week* winner, most recently for landing a market-moving \$1.8 billion settlement for monoline insurer Ambac five weeks into a trial against Bank of America stemming from the mortgage meltdown.

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

My favorite movies are *The Godfather* and the original *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* with Gene Wilder. That might sound inconsistent, but it reflects my personality: tough guy exterior, but an emotional and empathetic softy on the inside.



Photo: Ryland West/ALM

**Michael Carlinsky, partner at Quinn Emanuel.**

Truth is: I wear my heart on my sleeve. I am passionate about winning; I can heat up quickly. And I never back down from a fight. But that emotion is what propels me to be the best I can be. I also care deeply about people—especially those less fortunate. My mother instilled in me—and I have instilled in my three kids, two of whom are now practicing lawyers—the importance of giving back, of being charitable, and of always remembering not to judge others until you have walked a mile in their shoes.

I am also a creature of loyalty. Although I may be demanding as a boss (some might say impossible to work for), I have the longest-tenured secretary in the firm (over 30 years).

Aside from that, I exercise six days a week—always in the morning. I do aerobics and old-school weightlifting. I do it not for vanity's sake as much as for my physical and mental well-being. There is no better feeling than the release of endorphins at the start of the day. I also like to play golf, travel and collect wine and tequila.

**You're the son of a cab driver, the first in your family to go to college, and you graduated from a law school outside the T14. How do you think those things have shaped you as a litigator?**

I grew up in the Canarsie-Mill Basin section of Brooklyn. My dad drove a Yellow taxi. My mother worked multiple jobs to put food on the table. I have two younger siblings. I grew up in a three-family home—my grandmother and my great-grandmother lived in the apartment upstairs.

I went to public schools until college. I would describe us as lower middle class. As I have often said: "I knew we were poor growing up but didn't realize how poor until many years later." I can recall the days that my mom had to plead with ConEdison so they wouldn't turn off power in our house. I questioned whether I would ever go to college and never dreamed I would become a professional.

Growing up in Brooklyn was the greatest training ground for me and helped shape me. As a teenager, my friends and I played sports morning, noon and night—right outside on the street in front of my house. Stickball, baseball, football, hockey—they were all played on blacktop or concrete. You couldn't find a patch of grass within two miles of our house. The neighborhood where I lived was a tough place back in the 1970s and 1980s. You had to quickly figure out how to deal with people. I learned a lot growing up in that environment. I learned how to deal with conflicts and I learned how to read people. It's something I've brought with me into my career as a litigator and a trial lawyer. I often see a narrative in a case or see a legal argument that others don't see; I can also connect with judges or juries because I have that street sense that many lawyers don't have. I recently had a jury trial where the jury consultant recommended against a particular juror.

In fact, the juror's profile was exactly the opposite of what we wanted. But my instinct told me to keep that juror, which I did. Turned out that juror was my client's strongest advocate.

**You've been a co-managing partner at the firm for a few years now. What does that role entail?**

As co-managing partner, I have responsibility for running all aspects of the firm, as you would expect, while at the same time running and managing the nearly 40 active cases on which I am the lead lawyer. So I try to find that perfect balance—which can sometimes be a challenge.

As a litigation-only firm, we have eschewed lots of bureaucracy and politics, so it makes my job a lot easier. That said, there are a number of important projects and initiatives that we have undertaken in the last few years that are intended to grow headcount and strengthen the firm while instilling in our lawyers the unique culture of excellence and camaraderie that are the hallmarks of Quinn Emanuel.

In a typical week, my management responsibilities include decisions about hiring, compensation, partner promotions, associate elevations, office productivity, resolving conflicts, evaluating new offices, approving write-offs—you name it. Some are mundane. But many are exciting and exhilarating. One of my favorite activities is speaking with partners or associates about their cases and their clients—and their wins. I try to stay in touch with as many lawyers as possible—and strongly believe in an open-door policy, where I am accessible to everyone.

It's been a very gratifying role. Our performance last year showed the tremendous strength of this firm. We saw our profits per equity partner increase nearly 40% on revenues of over \$2 billion. It was truly a historic year, and I am so proud of all the people at the firm that contributed to this monumental success. In 2024, I expect us to have yet another record year. Our services continue to be very much in demand. Our existing clients as well as new clients are sending us their most significant, substantial matters. We were just voted the world's "most feared" law firm for the third year in a row. Our name and reputation have never been stronger.

That said, part of my role is to make sure we never grow complacent. We must continually strive to improve.

**How do you balance the demands of that position with your busy docket of client-facing work?**

This is a great question. I am first and foremost a practicing lawyer and a hardcore trial lawyer. I do three or four trials a year. I have a big portfolio of cases, and clients expect me to be the lead lawyer on them. If you know my personality or have ever gone to trial with me, you know that I devote 110% of myself to trial. I insist on knowing virtually every fact and document before I stand up and present the opening statement or conduct the first witness exam. So, my preparation for trial is relentless and I immerse myself in the case, which consumes almost every waking moment of the day. But I am able to do so because when I am unavailable, my co-managing partner Bill Burck or firm chairman John Quinn can step up and take over my responsibilities on the management side.

As for my other cases, I am fortunate to have extraordinary talent supporting me. I can sleep at night and go to trial knowing that my cases are also in the hands of the most able, capable lawyers around. My partners and associates are the very best of the best.

I tell every client, "I am here for you 24-7." They all have my cell phone numbers, and I encourage them to call me anytime, day or night. That's true whether I am on trial or not.

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

We span the globe with 1,188 lawyers in 35 offices around the nation and the world. Our single biggest office is in New York City, where we have 350 lawyers. We continue to have a major presence in California, where the firm began, with hundreds of lawyers in our Los Angeles, San Francisco and Silicon Valley offices combined. Our biggest office outside the U.S. is in London, where we have 125 lawyers.

We pride ourselves on our ability to work seamlessly across our offices around the globe. Our clients' disputes often cross borders, and so does the

service we provide them. We regularly field multi-office teams that combine the talents and skill sets of our U.S. offices with those of our London, German, French, Swiss, Asian and Mideast offices. I am a big believer in making sure we put the best team on the field for a given case—regardless of where the lawyers may physically reside. Right now, I have multiple cases involving lawyers from many offices across the U.S., London, Paris, Australia, China, Germany, Switzerland and elsewhere.

If there is a significant dispute happening somewhere in the world, the chances are high that Quinn Emanuel is involved. This is in large part because of our ability to build powerful, multi-office teams.

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

A combination of tenacity, creativity, intellectual firepower and raw ability. To take the last point first, we make it a point to hire the best talent. We hire junior lawyers out of law school who know they want to be litigators and trial lawyers. Unlike full-service firms where a young associate has the option of trying different practices, junior lawyers (and senior lawyers) come to Quinn because they want to be the very best litigators—and want to learn from the best.

We have a culture and firm philosophy where we start training young lawyers to think and act like trial lawyers as soon as they join. We have in-house programs, taught by the firm's best lawyers, that teach young lawyers how to think like experienced trial lawyers. We also strive to get lawyers into trial within their first two years.

The way we litigate and try cases makes us stand out from other firms, too. When we show up on a case, opposing counsel knows they are in for a fight. We are known for our trial practice, so our adversaries know we aren't "paper tigers" who always settle; rather, we send a message on behalf of our clients that we are prepared to take the case to trial.

We also litigate cases differently. I don't think it's any secret that we tend to be more aggressive and creative than other big firms. I often hear from lawyers at other firms commenting on how aggressive

Quinn Emanuel lawyers tend to be, and that many view us as their most formidable and feared adversary. We recognize the job we are hired to perform and that we are expected to win. We aren't afraid to think "out of the box" in how we develop cases and create the narratives.

But while we are proud of our aggressive public image, we have a strong internal culture of camaraderie. We are intensely team-oriented and collaborative. Our lawyers don't hesitate to parachute in to help each other out on cases.

**In what three areas of litigation do you have the deepest bench? (I know it's hard, but please name just three.)**

This is an impossible question for me to answer. It's like asking me to pick my favorite child. We excel in every kind of dispute, whether it's complex commercial litigation, intellectual property, white collar defense, bankruptcy, class-action, antitrust—you name it. I really can't pick three.

**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?**

Because we have nearly 1,200 litigators, there are so many cases—and so many wins to choose from.

In terms of generating headlines, it's hard to top the Alec Baldwin case. My partners **Alex Spiro** and **Luke Nikas** led a team that secured a truly stunning victory for Baldwin. The judge in New Mexico who was overseeing the case dismissed it with prejudice after finding that the state had withheld evidence that could have shed light on how live rounds got onto a film set where the cinematographer was fatally shot. After some exceptional courtroom lawyering by Luke and Alex, the judge said, «There is no way for the court to right this wrong.» It's hard to imagine a more decisive victory than that.

Sometimes, our best victories don't occur in court. One example from the past year is the result we achieved for Ken Griffin, the founder of hedge fund Citadel. Our team, led by Bill Burck, **AJ Merton**

and **Peter Fountain**, got the IRS to issue a public apology to Griffin for leaking his personal tax information. It's unheard of for the IRS to do that.

The apology came as part of a settlement the IRS reached in a lawsuit we brought on behalf of Griffin seeking to hold the IRS accountable for willful and intentional failures to safeguard taxpayers' personal information. The government initially said the leak could have resulted from the actions of a "hostile foreign state actor," but it came out that a former IRS contractor was disclosing tax return information without authorization.

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

As busy and high-stakes as ever. In Washington, D.C., we are representing the heads of a tech company called Next Jump in a white-collar case involving allegations they bribed the Navy's second highest-ranking admiral. That's a fascinating case that should come to trial fairly soon. My partner and co-managing partner Bill Burck is handling that one. And speaking of white-collar cases, we of course are representing Mayor Eric Adams in his case. Alex Spiro is leading that one, with help from Bill and some others.

In terms of my upcoming trial docket, I just finished back-to-back trials that lasted nearly two months. At one point recently, I actually had to cross-examine a witness in trial in New York on a Monday, take the Acela train to Delaware that evening so that I could put on a witness on Tuesday, then return that evening to New York to cross-examine an expert witness on Wednesday. While this is not typical, my trial schedule is hectic. I have four trials currently scheduled for next year, with a large IP jury trial in federal court, a trial in Delaware Court of Chancery and jury trials in two other commercial cases.

It's a crazy, thrill-filled profession, and it can be grueling at times. But, to lift a quote from *The Godfather Part II*: "This is the business we've chosen." Truth is, I can't think of a better job.