

For Depp Atty, Sudden Fame Can Bring Rewards — And Risk

By **Anna Sanders**

Law360 (June 9, 2022, 4:55 PM EDT) -- Camille Vasquez was a relatively obscure associate at Brown Rudnick LLP before her representation of Johnny Depp in his defamation case against Amber Heard landed her on the fast track to partner — and made her a minor pop culture icon.

Even before Vasquez helped **secure Depp \$15 million in damages last week** from Heard in their widely televised defamation cases against each other, her name trended across social media, with some supporters suggesting the litigator replace Heard in an "Aquaman" sequel and Photoshopping her into stills from the movie. One fan got a tattoo of her likeness and Vasquez even faced baseless claims she was dating her client, an unfounded rumor that Depp's representative has denied.

Vasquez's rise in prominence since the trial began in April shows the difficult tightrope attorneys in the spotlight must walk, according to observers and other so-called celebrity lawyers who've worked on high-profile cases or represented famous clients.

"It's like the difference between the normal football game and the playoff and the Super Bowl," said David Rudolf, a North Carolina criminal defense and civil rights attorney who's represented high-profile clients in murder trials. "It's not for the faint-hearted. But for a lawyer who cares about his or her craft and wants to perform at the highest level, it's just a great opportunity."

Vasquez and Brown Rudnick had no immediate comment.

While splashy cases can be a boon to attorneys' careers, lawyers can lose control over how the public and their peers in the legal industry perceive them, experts said. And while handling a well-known case may offer an interesting challenge, attorneys' work will be scrutinized more closely and they risk being pigeonholed into one area of the law.

Some attorneys also let the fame go to their heads.

"She's going to be really, really sought after, and I think it takes a really strong person to not start buying your own bullshit, basically," said Ann Murphy, a professor at Gonzaga University School of Law who has written about attorneys with high-profile clients.

After winning a trial as big as the Depp-Heard defamation case, attorneys like Vasquez often have their pick of cases, clients or even firms, according to Mark Geragos, principal at Geragos & Geragos in Los Angeles.

"She's going to get quite a few offers," said Geragos, who has represented celebrities including Chris Brown, Nicole Richie and Winona Ryder. "It changed the trajectory of her career."

Attorneys can also face blowback from colleagues who are jealous or look down on those in the limelight, celebrity attorneys said.

"It can certainly generate envy by those who feel they never got a similar opportunity," said Thomas Mesereau, a trial lawyer with several celebrity clients who is best known for winning an acquittal for Michael Jackson on 14 charges in a child molestation case.

Vasquez can counteract such "snobbish" condescension from other attorneys by focusing on

delivering for her clients, according to celebrity divorce lawyer Christopher Melcher of Walzer Melcher LLP.

"That way she then is known for doing high-quality work, not being known for being known," Melcher said.

Vasquez, a member of Brown Rudnick's litigation and arbitration practice at the firm's office in California's Orange County since 2018, was **elected to partner** early less than a week after the Depp verdict.

The Depp case is the first highly publicized matter Vasquez has worked on since she graduated from Southwestern Law School in 2010. While her practice at Brown Rudnick currently focuses on plaintiff-side defamation suits, she has also worked on contract disputes, business-related torts and employment claims, according to her firm biography, which notes that she "successfully prosecuted two breach of fiduciary cases for a high-profile client" and provides advice on media strategy.

Even so, Vasquez could find herself locked into practicing defamation cases. When an attorney represents one celebrity successfully, others may seek them out, experts noted.

"You don't want to be pigeonholed," Murphy said. "The next star coming up who wants to bring a defamation action will see her as the person to hire because she did a really good job."

Geragos said he would advise Vasquez to "take something a little bit outside of the norm" as her next case, because she may find her skills are better suited elsewhere or that she enjoys other kinds of matters.

"For many years I was irritated by being referred to as a 'celebrity lawyer,'" Geragos said. "Now it rolls off the back. But there's a chance you get pigeonholed."

And deciding whether to take on a high-profile client can also be tricky, because losing a major case can stay with an attorney. Even in the case of Heard's attorneys, who did not see a wholesale loss, the hit in court can be a ding, according to experts.

"There's so much negative attention there on Amber that then rubs off onto her lawyers, even though they all performed well and they all handle big roles in a huge case," Melcher said. "That's the risk of publicity."

Mesereau said close friends warned him against representing Jackson because, if he lost, everywhere in the world he went, "People are going say, 'That's the person who sent Michael Jackson to prison.'"

Attorneys on notable cases can't control how the public perceives them — like Vasquez, they can become part of the story whether they want to or not.

"The lawyer then becomes a caricature and all of a sudden, whether it's accurate or not, the public views the lawyer in that light," Melcher said.

This dynamic is particularly tough for attorneys when their cases are documented or fictionalized for entertainment.

Rudolf said he was frustrated by how he was portrayed in an HBO series that premiered last month depicting the case against his client Michael Peterson, who was accused of murdering his wife, Kathleen, in 2001.

While the drama was adapted from a 2018 docuseries of the same name that he and his client agreed to participate in, Rudolf said the series took several liberties, making him out to be a "greedy son of a gun," such as by incorrectly showing his client selling furniture to pay for an appeal. Rudolf also criticized the series for showing him meeting Peterson for the first time in a diner over a pastrami sandwich.

"They might as well have put a thing over my head and said, 'Jewish lawyer from New York,'" said Rudolf, who noted that he actually met Peterson for the first time at his client's home. "Those are the

typical, awful stereotypes that I was really hoping to overcome ... and it was completely unnecessary to the story."

Rudolf said he doesn't regret his role in the original documentary because it helped dispel preconceived notions and stereotypes about defense attorneys, even if this year's dramatization upended some of that work.

"You'd like them to at least be true to the facts, but you have no control," he said. "So am I going to sue anyone? No, but it's frustrating."

And when attorneys on high-profile cases become public figures, they also relinquish their privacy.

Mesereau said he purposely stayed out of restaurants and the public eye during the Jackson case because he "didn't want to be put in a compromising position by unscrupulous media."

"You've got to be very balanced and very measured and very careful in your reaction to being high-profile," he said.

Some attorneys can let fame get the better of them, opening the door for inappropriate, unethical or even illegal conduct.

Murphy pointed to disgraced celebrity attorney Michael Avenatti, who was recently **sentenced** to four years in prison for defrauding former client and adult film actress Stormy Daniels out of hundreds of thousands of dollars from a book deal.

"If an attorney is high-profile like that, some of them lose their minds and the story becomes them instead of their clients," Murphy said. "They love the fanfare and they love the attention, and they lose their perspective and many times lose their ethics."

While Vasquez is already set to appear in a Discovery+ series about the Depp-Heard case, Melcher and others noted she's kept relatively quiet since the June 1 verdict in favor of her client.

"You could see people turn very quickly against you," Melcher said. "Since she's remained quiet, that bolsters her reputation that she is a humble professional who is there for her client, she's not looking for fame, and she did her job in court."

Attorneys who take on big cases should take care not to let their newfound fame get to them, according to those who have worked with high-profile clients.

"What I've always tried to do is not let any of this go to my head and to be humble and to recognize that I'm not God's gift to the legal profession, that I make mistakes from time to time," Rudolf said. "How I present to the public, even now, has an impact on how people are going to perceive criminal defense lawyers, so I can't come across as a braggadocio jerk."

Vasquez and other attorneys who suddenly find themselves famous should be particularly careful about taking the same approach to all their future cases, even those that skate under the public's radar, celebrity lawyers said. And while Vasquez could use the Depp win to launch a career as cable commentator, she should not get distracted by the public's attention if she wants to continue practicing, experts said.

"The landscape is littered with what I call one-trick ponies," Geragos said. "The law is not dissimilar from sporting competitions in that one big win can put you on the map. But there's plenty of people who want to take you down after that, so there's something to be said about longevity and picking and choosing your moves."

Plus, the public's attention span is short.

"Enjoy the moment, but keep realistic and keep your balance," Mesereau said. "People will be all over you for one second and then ignore you when a bigger case comes along."

--Editing by Alanna Weissman.

