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Weinstein Prosecutor Joins Perry Guha As Of Counsel In NY

By Tracey Read

Law360 (October 12, 2022, 4:11 PM EDT) -- One of New York's top prosecutors with a record of high-profile convictions has joined litigation boutique Perry Guha LLP as of counsel.

Joan Illuzzi-Orbon, who retired from public service in January, started with the firm in September. Sexual assault cases will continue to be a large part of her practice.

The Staten Island native, who is also a fellow at the Manhattan Institute think tank, spoke with Law360 on Wednesday in a joint video interview with the firm's founding partners, Samidh Guha and E. Danya Perry.

As an assistant Manhattan district attorney, Illuzzi-Orbon led the New York prosecution of Hollywood producer **Harvey Weinstein**, an experience she found educational.



Joan Illuzzi-Orbon

"Not every woman who is sexually abused is able to take that next step and come and talk about it," Illuzzi-Orbon said. "But it was so important for me to really sit down and hear from them. How it is that they found themselves in a horrible dynamic with somebody who was perceived as so powerful and would garner such gravitas in an industry that you felt as though it was a do-or-die situation for you permanently — in your life, in your career, with your family — if you dared to complain and dared to say, 'Hey, wait a second, listen to what happened to me.'"

"And so what struck me the most was the deep intelligence. Many of these women were caught up in a dynamic that was so complex and confusing that any one of us would be super challenged to be able to extract ourselves without harm."

Illuzzi-Orbon also tried the 1996 double slaying at Scores nightclub — in which two brothers were convicted of fatally shooting a waiter and a bouncer during an argument over a mobster's girlfriend — and the kidnapping and murder of 6-year-old Etan Patz 30 years after he disappeared from a SoHo bus stop.

She also obtained guilty pleas from Jay-Z for assault in 2001 and Ja Rule for attempted gun possession in 2010.

After graduating from New York University, Illuzzi-Orbon went on to St. John's University School of Law and then the DA's office — where she would spend the next 33 years of her career. Her roles there included trial lawyer, senior trial counsel, chief of hate crimes and then executive assistant and chief of the trial division, according to her Manhattan Institute biography.

"We want to work with people we like, that we respect, and have judgment and are just kind, generous people, and Joan checks all those boxes 20 times over," Guha said. "There aren't that many people I know who have that combination of skills, and we're lucky that not only did we find her, but that she's also willing to work with us."

Perry said she met the former prosecutor while she was consulting on another case and found her so impressive that she introduced her to the firm's co-founder.

"I've never seen someone communicate better and more easily with clients — with survivors — than she does, and there's nothing she won't do for them," Perry said. "She goes well above and beyond. They can call her in the middle of the night, and she will come over there in the middle of the night if they're feeling scared, or they just want to talk. She'll help them get security systems built up, she'll help them find a bodyguard if they need to go out — because she cares. I've actually never seen another lawyer do that."

On the other hand, Perry said she would not want to go against Illuzzi-Orbon in court.

"She's completely professional, completely respectful, but tough as nails when she needs to be to enable her clients," Perry added. "She's got just the right mix of empathy and kindness. But, you know, she is an absolute ... can I say badass?"

Another highlight of Illuzzi-Orbon's career was prosecuting the murder of "Realtor to the stars" Linda Stein, a real estate broker and music manager who helped launch the careers of The Ramones, Madonna, Talking Heads and The Pretenders. Stein was found dead in her Manhattan apartment in 2007, and her former assistant was sentenced in 2010 to the maximum 25 years to life for the crime.

"Her murder was truly a murder mystery," Illuzzi-Orbon said of Stein. "Solving it and resolving it was extraordinary. I'm still in touch with her daughter."

However, she said some of the cases that have stayed with her don't involve the rich and famous, recalling an abused mother of five named Karen who was stabbed to death by her husband.

"That case was so important to me because you could see directly how this was just a complete life-changing, horrible, horrible event for these beautiful, beautiful children," Illuzzi-Orbon said. "And to this day, I keep in touch with them. I love these children. They're just wonderful and resourceful, and survivors. And so that case to me was the most important work that I was doing as prosecutor — to be able to let them know that they are safe now. And that there was some sort of vindication."

Dr. Sadie Elisseou, the firm's trauma-informed practice consultant, said Illuzzi-Orbon is a key addition to Perry Guha.

"I think it's transformative for survivors of violence to be working with someone who's on their team, who really sees them, values and honors their story and makes a commitment to be part of their healing journey," Elisseou told Law360. "They're being asked personal questions often by strangers in circumstances in which they perceive little control and that they don't have agency and things may not go their way, and all of that can not only be acutely distressing, but also re-traumatizing."

"So you need someone to be able to put themselves in the shoes of the client and really work with them in a collaborative manner. Give them choice, help them to feel physically, psychologically and emotionally safe. And in that circumstance, in a trauma-informed legal proceeding, everyone wins."

Midtown Manhattan-based Perry Guha represents companies and individuals in high-stakes government and internal investigations, trials and appeals.

Illuzzi-Orbon said part of what attracted her to the firm is that — with careful vetting — its lawyers are open to representing men who are accused of committing sexual assaults as well as men who claim that they themselves are victims.

"I often say being sexually assaulted is probably truly one of the worst things that could happen to you in your lifetime," she said. "Being accused of the same wrongfully is of equal devastation to someone's life. So it's similar to my work with [the DA], because we didn't get paid by indictment. We didn't get paid by prosecution, by conviction. We got paid every day to do what is right."

"And here I feel as though I'm doing the same thing. For a career prosecutor to come into a civil world, that is the best it'll ever be."

--Editing by Rich Mills.

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