

TOP WOMEN LAWYERS



Rutan & Tucker LLP

Costa Mesa

PRACTICE: Labor and employment litigation and transactions

Maria Z. Stearns

Stearns doesn't hesitate to say that being a woman informs her approach to litigation.

"We see articles about how it's harder to be a woman but I think we have an advantage in many respects. We're very good communicators, we're perceptive, we're emotionally astute."

In a groundbreaking case, Stearns took the unusual approach of negotiating a settlement in which class members were paid entirely in meal vouchers for the El Pollo Loco restaurant they worked in.

"There had been no wage and hour class action that I could find where the employees

received payment in chicken, essentially."

Typically in wage and hour class actions, Stearns says, "the amount class members get is really insignificant. For minimum wage workers, being able to feed their family is more valuable than getting a check for \$5 or \$10."

Building rapport with colleagues is central to Stearns approach. "Within the first 60 to 90 days of the case, I try to have an in-person meeting with opposing counsel, to share my client's view of what happened, and to hear their view of things. I think that when you have that face-to-face meeting, which occurs less and less now — people don't even talk

on the phone anymore, they just email — it allows the parties to have a better mindset towards, 'Hey, let's see if we can resolve this.'"

Stearns feels employment in particular can be a highly emotionally charged area of the law, which is crucial to consider. "We can sit there in our rooms and talk about numbers, but behind all of this, I think all litigation involves emotions at a certain point. And I do believe that a female has a unique ability and skill set to do it."

— L.J. Williamson