

Daily Journal

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TOP WOMEN LAWYERS

The Daily Journal's Annual List of Leading Women Lawyers in California



Maria Z. Stearns

As an employment defense attorney, Stearns sees her role as more than firefighting through litigation. She's a teacher, too, and prides herself on turning lawsuits into learning experiences.

"California's a really hard place to be an employer," Stearns said. "I like the teaching part of my job and trying to help the employer proactively manage this really difficult landscape."

Stearns helps companies facing wage-and-hour audits, and she works to help her clients avoid lawsuits before they're filed. She also boasts a long resume of defensive wins, including the dismissal of a wage-and-hour class action involving security guards at the Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival.

She secured individual settlement agreements this year in a class action against a California multi-location employer, using the so-called Pick-Up Stix strategy established in *Chindarah v. Pick-Up Stix Inc.*, 171 Cal. App.4th 796 (2009) to draft offers that have been accepted by at least 150 of

the 179 class members. Opposing counsel sought emergency relief from the court "to stop what we were doing," Stearns said, which a judge denied.

Stearns has used the strategy in other cases, including in securing settlements in a case with more than 500 class members.

"If you're going to spend money defending a case, maybe there's a creative way to make something good out of it and invest back in employees instead of attorneys," Stearns said.

She's finalizing a settlement on behalf of a large California restaurant group in three wage-and-hour class actions that will cost the company \$1.08 million for a 21,000-employee class, with only about half of that in cash and the remaining part in restaurant gift cards to the class.

"Litigation and sometime frivolous lawsuits are just part of the framework here," Stearns said. "What I try to do with my clients is use the lawsuits as an opportunity for them to learn how to be better."

— Meghann M. Cuniff

RUTAN & TUCKER LLP

COSTA MESA

Practice Type: Labor and
employment