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Outside the Box

Defying expectations is a way of life for Harmeet Dhillon of Dhillon Law Group, who's vice chairman of the state Republican Party and a former American Civil Liberties Union board member.

By Joshua Sebold
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SAN FRANCISCO — In a world where politics seems to become more partisan by the day, Harmeet K. Dhillon refuses to be placed into a box.

The San Francisco resident is the owner of Dhillon Law Group Inc., the current vice chair man of the California Republican Party, a former American Civil Liberties Union board member, and a friend of conservative author Ann Coulter.

Dhillon's practice is similarly diverse, representing plaintiffs and defendants, often in the same industries. She represents Yelp Inc. in intellectual property disputes and is suing Comcast Corp. for allegedly sharing details from a customer service call with one of its customers' employers, resulting in the customer losing his job.

She is also a celebrated leader in the Sikh community, having taken up the cause of representing Sikhs who were persecuted across the country after 9/11 for wearing turbans that perpetrators mistakenly associated with terrorists.

"In her role as the vice chair of the Republican Party of California, she is the highest ranking Sikh party official in the country," said Amar Shergill, a fellow Sikh civil rights attorney and founder of the South Asian Bar Association of Sacramento. "I can't think of a firm led by a South Asian attorney that is her peer."

The rainmaker says her high profile as a political figure, election law expert and commercial litigator, combined with her small firm platform, allow her to take — or turn down — whatever cases she likes. Dhillon says she doesn't compete on price and doesn't pursue work based on volume. The firm charges \$550 per hour for her time and between \$275 and \$425 for associates. Projected revenue for the firm is roughly \$1.5 million for the year.

"I pride myself on delivering Shearman & Sterling quality work product in the courts and that's hard to do in a small firm," she said. "I'm sure no big law firm here in the city would sue Comcast for various reasons on a consumer complaint like this, but it's fun, it's interesting."

Dhillon is no stranger to controversy. She erupted onto the national political scene in 1988 as the embattled editor of The Dartmouth Review, a conservative student paper. Several editors working beneath her were suspended from the school after the newspaper published a

transcript of political comments made by a music professor at the college. The editors visited the classroom to get a follow up comment from the professor, which resulted in a confrontation that split the campus. Some students voiced concerns that the professor was being harassed for being African American, but the American Civil Liberties Union came to defense of the editors, claiming their freedom of speech was violated. The students won their case and were reinstated, giving Dhillon a taste of the legal world that led her to law school.

"I took on my college and I was a witness, and at the end of that process the students got reinstated and Dartmouth had to pay \$1 million dollars in attorney fees to this ACLU lawyer. That was awesome as a 20-year-old."

Years later, after she became well known for her civil rights work aiding persecuted Sikhs, but before her political career took off, Dhillon was invited to serve on the board of the ACLU, which she did for three years.

"I was the only out Republican definitely and I was constantly voting against things like their stupid internal labor practices."

Dhillon isn't now active with the ACLU, but noted that she and Rand Paul, who she recently introduced at a major party function, have more beliefs in common with the organization than many would guess.

"I don't think the government should be spying on us. I don't think there should be drones overhead taking pictures of me. I don't think drones should be used to kill people without a warrant."

The Dartmouth incident also launched her political career. Years later Dhillon signed up to host a viewing party for a national debate in the 2004 presidential election. She said the San Francisco Republican Party recognized her name from the Dartmouth incident and was ecstatic, inviting her to become more active in the organization. She became chair of that chapter four years ago and later ran for vice chairman of the party at the state level, becoming the first woman to hold the position when she won in March 2013. Dhillon lives and breathes politics, serving as spokesperson for the party on the state level and taking defamation or intellectual property cases for it on a pro bono basis.

"Yesterday I get emails about two slate mailers that are grossly ripping off our elephant trademark, and by noon [associate and managing attorney Krista L. Baughman] will have demand letters out to them



Sam Attal / Special to the Daily Journal

Harmeet Dhillon of Dhillon Law Group said she prides herself on "delivering Shearman & Sterling quality work product in the courts."

telling them to cease and desist."

Dhillon also leverages that political expertise into work for which she receives compensation. She recently got a candidate removed from the primary election for U.S. representative in California's 17th Congressional District. Two candidates entered the race late as Republicans, leading Dhillon to file a case in Sacramento on behalf of a member of the Alameda County Republican Central Committee, alleging the candidate's signatures were attained fraudulently.

"They weren't Republicans like last week, but they registered as Republicans and they're very fishy," she said. "If I had won on both of them the outcome of this election would be different, but we got one candidate kicked out."

While her political career was advancing, Dhillon had also been developing her litigation chops. After a decade of big firm life, with stops at Shearman & Sterling LLP, Sidley Austin LLP, Cooley Godward LLP and Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP, she moved to a small four-partner firm, Oakland-based Gibbs & Oliphant LLP. After a couple years, she and fellow litigation partner Peter Smith left to form their own firm. Eight years later, this September, the partners separated to form their own firms. Dhillon kept five of the firm's six associates.

Her practice focuses on serving technology companies, their founders and executives, and politicians, in commercial disputes, intellectual property matters, labor and employment issues at the executive level, defamation and election law and other political matters.

Dhillon said she is open to possibilities for expansion. She is considering opening an office in Sacramento, which would likely include one attorney and a space for her to hold meetings. The firm doesn't currently do much campaign finance

work, but Dhillon said that was a logical practice for the attorney in that office. She also takes calls from slightly larger firms in Southern California that are looking to add a Northern California office.

"I don't think I ever want to practice at a firm with more than 20 lawyers," she said. "My goal is to grow through maybe a couple of partners joining me who have compatible practices over the next two years, then associates to support those partners."

Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge Socrates Peter Manoukian, who presided over a trial where Dhillon represented the board of an Indian restaurant that ousted one of its members, said the case involved witnesses that spoke a variety of dialects and came from different parts of India. He said Dhillon had a remarkable ability to explain complicated social interactions between different cultural groups on the board to a judge who was unfamiliar with them.

He said she impressed him with her ability to remain calm and collected in a case that was inherently emotionally charged, in which she ultimately prevailed.

"The cross-examination was surgically precise. It wasn't overdone or underdone, while maintaining the witness's dignity."

Brandon Baum, a partner at Agility IP Law who previously supervised Dhillon when she worked at Cooley, said Dhillon has cultivated a reputation for her calm yet aggressive approach, coupled with her talent as a litigator, which makes many adversaries hesitant to call her bluffs. Baum said he saw that talent in action when working with her on cases in the past.

"She has, in her own unique style, aggressively explained to our opponent that things were not going to go well if they got into litigation. And I think it's a combination of her tenacity and reputation that make people realize she's not bluffing."