

# DAILY BUSINESS REVIEW

PROFILES IN LAW

## Before Jeffrey Epstein’s Victims Had a Case, They Had Boies Schiller Veteran Sigrid McCawley

by Raychel Lean

Years before the Miami Herald wrote about the sex trafficking victims of financier Jeffrey Epstein, and before attorneys nationwide became involved in litigation, Fort Lauderdale lawyer **Sigrid McCawley** was dedicating thousands of pro bono hours to Virginia Giuffre’s cause.

At that point, there was no route to litigation, so McCawley had to think outside the box to represent the woman accusing Epstein of sexual abuse.

“We started the representation when she didn’t actually have a case,” McCawley said.



J. ALBERT DIAZ/ALM

Boies Schiller Flexner partner Sigrid McCawley, above, helped champion the case of Virginia Giuffre, who accused wealth manager Jeffrey Epstein of sexual abuse.

**SIGRID MCCAWLEY**

**Born:** Upstate New York

**Spouse:** Daniel McCawley

**Children:** Kincaid, Maxwell, Zachary, Madeleine

**Education:** University of Florida, J.D., 1997; University of Florida, B.A., 1994

**Experience:** Partner, Boies Schiller Flexner, 2001-present; Associate, Morgan Lewis & Bockius, 1999-2011; Law clerk, U.S. District Judge Jose Gonzalez Jr.; Liaison for Ambassador Richard N. Gardner, President’s Advisory Committee on United States Trade Relations, 2000-2001.

Epstein pleaded guilty and was convicted in 2008 of felony prostitution involving a minor, through a plea agreement that has since been criticized as a sweetheart deal. He **died in 2019** by suicide in federal custody while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges in a case that captured international media attention because it implicated some of the world’s wealthiest men.

Giuffre had accused Epstein of abusing her in the early 2000s, but her attorney said it wasn’t until she had her daughter years later that she felt brave enough to speak up. By then, the 10-year statute of limitations had expired.

“The No. 1 thing she wanted out of everything was to have Epstein put in prison,” McCawley said. “And I said to her, ‘I’m not a criminal lawyer, I’m so

sorry. ... But let me see what we can do.' ”

McCawley helped bring a defamation claim against Ghislaine Maxwell, Epstein's friend who allegedly procured underage girls for his sex trafficking ring. Then came a game-changing shift in public attitude toward survivors of sexual assault, as evidenced in the #MeToo movement.

“ Different people were starting to listen to victims in a way that they didn't when Virginia's case was first filed,” McCawley said. “People started believing victims, and it was really just a matter of timing, because of other circumstances that were going on, with these actresses coming out and being very vocal.”

Other victims came forward, including Sarah Ransome, bringing an influx of much-needed information with them. Giuffre's defamation case settled, but she and others continued speaking out. That caught the Miami Herald's attention and, ultimately, the attention of the Southern District of New York.

The night Epstein was arrested, McCawley called Giuffre, who was in Australia, to let her know.

“We both cried,” McCawley said. “Being able to make that call and say, ‘The one thing you wanted to do is stop this predator, and you've done it,’ that was really special. It was her voice and her strength in so many ways that brought that about.”

McCawley said it hasn't been easy for Epstein's victims to accept his suicide. Many still have cases against Epstein's estate, though money wasn't what they wanted.

“They really wanted him to be punished,” McCawley said. “He has ruined so many lives, and he took that from them by very cowardly taking his own life.”

Giuffre has alleged Epstein forced her to have sex with Prince Andrew, who denies that allegation but was heavily criticized after **an interview** in which he refused to say he regretted his friendship with Epstein. He has since stepped away from royal duties.

“It's a journey,” McCawley said. “Hopefully at the end of it, all of those victims will feel some peace in what we've been able to do.”

Raised by a single mother who worked three jobs to put McCawley and her sisters through school, it wasn't until she was writing an honors thesis for a history degree that she thought about law school—when her professor commented she'd make a fantastic lawyer.

At the University of Florida, another professor recommended McCawley apply for clerkship. And with “blind faith,” she did, receiving a “yes” from the first judge who interviewed her: U.S. District Judge Jose Gonzalez Jr. in the Southern District of Florida.

It was an invaluable way to learn to litigate, as McCawley watched civil and criminal lawyers manage their trials every day.

“There's no better training than sitting behind the bench, because he would say, ‘Sigrid, that's a good example of lawyering; that's a bad example of lawyering,’ ” McCawley said.

### ‘Baby’ Boies Schiller

After a couple of years with Morgan Lewis in Washington, D.C., McCawley fled the cold with her husband, real estate attorney Daniel McCawley. She then crossed paths with David Boies, whose then-small, fledgling firm Boies Schiller Flexner was establishing its South Florida presence.

When Boies' daughter Caryl introduced McCawley to the attorney, he was struck by her presence, judgment and articulation.

“She had the spark,” Boies said. “The ability not only to analyze a problem but to figure out how to present that problem in a way that people can understand.”

Immediately thrown into the deep end, McCawley represented large companies across the nation at what was then “a baby of a firm,” abuzz with “beautiful minds.”

“The firm was wildly busy because David had all of these interesting cases,” McCawley said. “And as a young lawyer I was walking into depositions and taking them, meanwhile at my other firm, I was like fifth chair, if that.”

Now a litigation powerhouse, Boies Schiller still feels small to McCawley.

“I think because I've been here so long, I know everybody.

I'm like the historian, I guess," McCawley said. "I feel like I grew up at this firm."

As someone who hates to be "put in a box," McCawley appreciated that Boies Schiller embraced plaintiff and defense cases. The firm's clients include Del Monte Foods Inc. and Carnival Cruise Line, and her practice covers intellectual property, commercial contracts, international disputes and plaintiffs work. She thrives on variety, forcing her to invent fresh legal solutions each time.

"I love the challenge of a new case every time it comes in the door, maybe too much," McCawley said.

Boies calls her an extraordinary leader at the firm.

"I think she'll be recognized as one of the leading trial lawyers nationally," Boies said. "She has made, and she is making, extraordinary contributions to obtaining justice for children and other victims of sex trafficking and abuse."

#### **'We don't go away'**

McCawley helped negotiate a \$155 million settlement in a class action against Quixtar, also known as Amway, accused of fraud and racketeering. While no other firm had challenged the organization's practices, McCawley saw "a wrong that needed to be righted."

"Everybody was just allowing them to exist, even though they were essentially a pyramid scheme," McCawley said. "There's no other way to describe it."

It wasn't a quick resolution.

"I was pregnant with my first child when I started the case, and he was almost 10 when we completed it," McCawley said.

But McCawley said that's what she loves about her firm: that it's not afraid to invest in long-term, risky litigation.

"We stand behind what we get involved in," she said. "And I think that the other side learns that fairly quickly. We don't go away."

One securities fraud case **against energy giant Halliburton Co.** went to the U.S. Supreme Court twice—where McCawley's team won, and won again, before landing a \$100 million class action settlement.

"If the Supreme Court had not gone our way it really would have changed the landscape of securities class action, almost allowing none to be brought," McCawley said.

McCawley is now a finalist for the American Lawyer's national litigator of the year award, but her best friend, land use attorney **Stephanie Toothaker**, still recalls meeting her on day one of law school, queuing to buy books.

"I remember her standing in front of me, this tall, incredibly beautiful, blonde vision," Toothaker said. "I just remember thinking how beautiful she was. And she turned around and we started talking, and I knew immediately that she was beautiful on the inside and the outside."

Toothaker said she's not surprised McCawley reached the level she has, because she doesn't do anything halfway.

"She was always the person that was the most prepared for whatever task," Toothaker said. "She puts the time and effort in and does her research, and she's not to be stopped."

Having enlisted legal help from McCawley as in-house counsel to Trividia Health, Pennie Goldmann describes her as an all-access, results driven litigator.

"She is not a 9-to-5, Monday through Friday-type person," Goldmann said. "Sometimes I wonder if she has more than 24 hours in a day."

McCawley has four children with her husband, and also chairs the board of ChildNet, a foster care agency in Broward and Palm Beach, which seeks homes for more than 3,000 children who have suffered abuse and neglect.

McCawley's next goal is to abolish the federal trafficking statute of limitations.

"At the beginning of [Giuffre's] case, I was very frustrated and I said, 'David, this is just so inherently unfair. These victims, they can't do anything because so many years have passed.' And he said, 'Well then, we'll just have to change the law.' "

**Raychel Lean reports on South Florida litigation for the Daily Business Review. Send an email to [rlean@alm.com](mailto:rlean@alm.com), or follow her on Twitter via [@raychellean](https://twitter.com/raychellean).**