

MVP: Covington's Gretchen Hoff Varner

By **Jennifer Mandato**

Law360 (November 5, 2024, 12:02 PM EST) -- Gretchen Hoff Varner of Covington & Burling LLP secured a \$70 million judgment in favor of Brooklyn Union Gas Co., now owned by National Grid, establishing coverage for decades of environmental contamination along New York's Gowanus Canal, earning her a spot as a **2024 Law360 Insurance MVP**.





Gretchen Hoff Varner

Covington

Her greatest accomplishment over the past year:

As lead counsel, Hoff Varner overcame years of discovery, pretrial motions, appeals and a pandemic delay in an effort to obtain a jury verdict "overwhelmingly" in favor of Brooklyn Union Gas, where the jury agreed that Brooklyn Union's insurers breached their contracts by failing to cover pollution cleanup costs.

"That was a great verdict, not just for Brooklyn Union, but for the people of Brooklyn because it's more money and resources to help make the Gowanus Canal as clean and livable as possible," she

told Law360.

While the carriers attempted to challenge the verdict, a New York state court upheld the decision in March, entering judgment in favor of Brooklyn Union for more than \$70 million.

Although Covington didn't represent Brooklyn Union from the case's inception in the 1990s, its culmination still marked a major triumph for Hoff Varner's career because of the victory both for the company and the local community, she said.

Other notable cases she's worked on:

Hoff Varner has also proudly represented Target for 10 years in the retail giant's attempt to secure coverage for data breach losses.

Target turned to Covington to **recover** a portion of \$138 million in settled claims with banks that issued credit cards compromised by a 2013 data breach. While a Minnesota federal court initially ruled that Target's claims were not covered, Hoff Varner helped file a motion arguing that the court relied on a legal theory that neither party briefed.

The court later reversed the judgment, ordering Target's insurers to indemnify the company for its settlements. The action ultimately reached a resolution in November 2023.

"That summary judgment motion was a real personal success partly because of how long I've been working on the matter and partly because it was a great result for the client," Hoff Varner said.

Having the court reverse its decision after originally finding against Target was "a real triumph of advocacy," she shared.

Her biggest challenge of the past year:

Still, past the high-profile cases, Hoff Varner told Law360 that her biggest challenge remains finding a work-life balance.

As a trial lawyer, she said she can't imagine a better way to use her law degree than by "standing in the courtroom talking to a jury."

"But trying to balance that with being a mom and all of the other obligations that go along with that just continues to be a lifelong work in progress," Hoff Varner said.

What keeps her motivated:

Despite these challenges, Hoff Varner's clients continue to serve as motivation, she said.

"I always think that clients hire outside counsel when there is a problem that is so stressful that our clients decide that they can't or don't want to handle it themselves," she told Law360, "They're asking us to carry that stress on their behalf and that's a real honor to me."

Hoff Varner's clients often feel surprised and sometimes troubled by "the fact that this contract they've relied on has just basically disappeared" after they spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on insurance coverage, she said.

To "go after" these insurance contracts and attempt to secure their benefits in an effort to make it right on her clients' behalf gives Hoff Varner a great deal of pride, she shared.

Why she practices insurance law:

Hoff Varner told Law360 she discovered the insurance coverage practice as an associate at Covington.

"Covington has what I think is the world's best policyholder-side practice," she said.

As a result, she benefited from incredible mentors within the practice who she said taught her everything she knows.

Covington's trial-focused approach to insurance cases added to Hoff Varner's interest, as she always knew she wanted to be a trial lawyer.

"This gave me an opportunity to actually take cases to trial and to stand up in front of a judge or a jury and make my case," she said. "[Covington's approach to insurance] gave me an opportunity to do far more trial work than I think I would have had in a lot of other practices at any firm."

Her advice to junior attorneys:

As a proud partner at Covington, Hoff Varner told Law360 her best advice for junior attorneys is to pretend like they're the partner on every single case.

"Think about how your work impacts the broader strategy of the case," she said, "I think by taking that ownership and thinking about the larger strategic implications of their work and really caring about the outcome, junior associates can really distinguish themselves and make phenomenal contributions to a matter."

Hoff Varner shared that she relies heavily on her junior associates, and it excites her to see a strong future for the practice.

"Litigation is a team sport and I need everybody working at the top of their game to deliver the kinds of results that we expect for our clients," she said.

--As told to Jennifer Mandato. Editing by Adam LoBelia.

Law360's MVPs are attorneys who have distinguished themselves from their peers over the past year through high-stakes litigation, record-breaking deals and complex global matters. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2024 MVP winners after reviewing nearly 900 submissions.