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## A New Path

*Attorneys at cannabis boutique Manzuri Law take pride in thinking outside the box.*

By Shane Nelson

Daily Journal Staff Writer

Longtime cannabis attorney Meital Manzuri doesn't spend as much time in criminal court as she used to.

When she started West Hollywood-based Manzuri Law in 2010, all of her cannabis clients were facing some type of criminal charge. Ten years later, Manzuri said criminal defense work makes up less than 10% of her practice.

"The amount we do is just enough to keep me happy," she said. "The criminal defense matters are so time intensive. They're more stressful and demanding than anything else because someone's liberty is at stake."

Today, most of the work Manzuri Law tackles falls either in the regulatory compliance and licensing fields or involves transactional matters, including M&A and corporate formation issues.

"What's really exciting about what we do is it's always changing. It's always new," Manzuri said. "The regulations tend to change on a daily basis."

Manzuri said her first work on a cannabis case came in 2005 during her time as a summer associate at the Pier 5 Law Offices in San Francisco, where she helped defend Ed Rosenthal, a cannabis legend who had been deputized by the city of Oakland to grow medical marijuana for AIDS patients but then faced federal cultivation and conspiracy charges.

"It was really interesting the juxtaposition between federal laws and state laws," Manzuri said of the trial. "Cannabis cases always seemed particularly egregious to me in the sense that the federal government was going after these individuals at the time for something that was potentially state compliant."

After handling cannabis criminal defense while working for other small firms, Manzuri decided to hang her



Justin L. Stewart / Special to the Daily Journal

From left: Nicole Aaronson, Meital Manzuri, Tyler Hastings of Manzuri Law.

own shingle in March of 2010, looking for more independence while she started a family. Today, Manzuri Law is a three-attorney shop, also home to associates Nicole A. Aaronson and Tyler W. Hastings, who joined earlier this year.

"I just think cannabis in general gets a bad rap," Aaronson said of common misconceptions about the practice area. "I guess everyone assumes that if you're going to be in cannabis law, you must be a big stoner, but I have found that not to be the case. The cannabis industry needs competent attorneys just as much as any other."

Aaronson, who worked for nearly four years previously in the cannabis group at Wilson Elser, said she was attracted to the practice area because of the chance to help develop new laws and regulations in a burgeoning industry. Noting Manzuri has long been "at the forefront of anything LA cannabis related," Aaronson said the chance to learn and work with an industry leader was too good to pass up.

"I really admired Meital's ability to stake that out, given how many different firms and attorneys were really trying to get there," Aaronson said.

Alexander J. Freedman, general counsel of the Los Angeles Department of Cannabis Regulation in 2018 and

2019, worked frequently with Manzuri during his time as a city regulator, and he described the Los Angeles cannabis industry as huge, saying "it's the size of many states' cannabis markets."

"Meital is certainly one of the most active and experienced attorneys for LA cannabis licensing," Freedman said. "Any client dealing with her is in good hands."

Staying on top of the ever-shifting regulatory landscape — a turbulent sea of dramatic variance and often conflict between local, state and federal laws — has been a fulfilling challenge for Manzuri, who said good cannabis attorneys need to be creative.

"A lot of lawyers need a really clear framework to work within to excel," she said. "In cannabis, that's really not true. You need to be able to pull from every kind of different area of the law, be able to think critically and really outside the box to be able to achieve your clients' goals and the best results."

The opportunity to distinguish herself in a rapidly expanding industry and evolving regulatory environment has been another tremendous positive, Manzuri said.

"Usually the expert in the room is older, male, someone from a traditional law firm," she explained. "What I really enjoy is that at this point in my

youngish career, I am one of the foremost experts on cannabis law in the state."

Commercial litigator Joshua R. Mandell, chair of the Los Angeles County Bar Association's Cannabis Section said Manzuri, who is a member of the section's executive committee, has been a key part of the group's social equity work.

"She is a passionate advocate for racial and social justice generally," Mandell said, "and especially within the cannabis industry."

Mandell described LACBA's social equity effort in the cannabis space as "an attempt to level the playing field with communities of color that have primarily been victimized by the war on drugs and left behind and disadvantaged."

"Then we have this influx of more privileged folks being able to exploit this opportunity for legal cannabis," he continued. "So Meital has been a very active participant in LACBA's social equity subcommittee, facilitating assistance for social equity applicants in the city of Los Angeles."

Employing her extensive experience not only for her clients but also to help mentor younger attorneys is another substantially satisfying part of the job, according to Manzuri, who noted she's been working closely in recent weeks on a number of complex M&A deals with Hastings.

Before joining Manzuri Law earlier this year, the bulk of Hastings experience had been in corporate transactional matters, including cross-border investment deals between China and U.S. businesses. He said the opportunity to apply that background to cannabis M&A work has been a fun challenge, and Manzuri has been a fantastic teacher.

"There are new issues that come up every day, which allows for a certain amount of creativity," he said. "You have to be learning and on your toes all the time."