

# Natalie J. Spears

## Partner



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## Overview

Natalie Spears is a trial lawyer and represents clients in courts across the US in a wide range of matters, including consumer class actions, IP, media and advertising disputes, complex commercial and real estate litigation. She is lauded by clients as “tenacious and pragmatic” and is recognized for her courtroom achievements. As head of Dentons’ global Technology, Media and Telecommunications sector and a former member of the US Board, Natalie sets direction for the firm’s commitment to exceptional client service.

Natalie offers clients advice that is creative, concise and uses common sense. She leads teams with this approach to achieve successful outcomes in business and in litigation. Her clients include leading global media, news and entertainment companies, as well as major US retail, real estate and consumer products and services companies.

Her work and litigation victories were featured in *Leading Lawyer Magazine*, Top 10 in Illinois, earning a spot on the cover in the "*Leading Women Lawyers*" edition, March 2015, and as part of the *National Law Journal's* "2014 Chicago Litigation Department of Year".

Natalie has been routinely called upon to secure the media's First Amendment rights over the past two decades, often in high-profile cases of public importance. Her clients include, among others, NBC, CBS, HBO, CNN, Netflix, Advance Publications, Dow Jones, The New York Times and Tribune Publishing. In recent public records litigation, she led the charge for 15 major news organizations to vacate the sealing order in the prosecution of Jussie Smollett, obtained judgment and fees in a precedential FOIA action against the Mayor and City of Chicago over use of private emails and texts about public business, and has won numerous access motions, including in the 2019 Laquan McDonald murder trial.

## Experience

- Lead counsel for Dow Jones and one of its long-time reporters defeating a defamation suit based on a Barron’s online article which was dismissed in 2020 after successfully transferring the case from Florida to the Southern District of New York.
- Lead counsel winning dismissal of a defamation lawsuit against Netflix and director Ava DuVernay over the critically acclaimed Netflix series *When They See Us*, brought by a police interrogation company in Chicago.

- Lead counsel for AMC Networks defeating a class action in the SDNY under the VPPA for allegedly improper disclosures involving AMC's *Walking Dead* website.
- Lead counsel for Redbox defending a putative consumer class action against the movie and video game rental service, alleging multi-million dollar violations of the Video Privacy Protection Act (VPPA). Won complete summary judgment victory affirmed by the Seventh Circuit, following an earlier, interlocutory appeal eliminating other claims.
- Served as one of the lead trial counsel in dispute over the Rams' NFL stadium lease in St. Louis. The arbitration panel awarded the Rams a US\$734 million stadium improvement plan and attorneys' fees, stating, "it is difficult to envision that the Rams could have obtained better representation for the arbitration."
- Lead counsel in successful copyright and trademark case for Topps against former artist related to continued use of Garbage Pail Kids card designs.
- Won summary judgment for Chicago Tribune in a trademark lawsuit over use of the "Joy of Six" on promotional merchandise.
- Lead counsel for the Golf Channel sports television network in a breach of contract, trade secrets and Computer Fraud and Abuse Act case; dismissal granted.
- Lead and co-lead counsel in the successful defense of numerous putative class actions in cases around the country, prevailing at the pleadings stage, on class certification, through pre-trial settlements and at trial, on various types of claims, including allegations of false advertising, privacy and statutory violations, consumer fraud, antitrust violations and breach of contract.
- Lead counsel for Dow Jones, winning dismissal of a putative class action in federal court in Atlanta involving the *Wall Street Journal Live* app.
- Won multi-count defamation and privacy action for NBC brought by a Chicago public official against NBC and the BGA; dismissal affirmed on appeal.
- Lead counsel for Pulte Homes defeating an alleged US\$25 million defamation, unfair competition and breach of contract case on summary judgment in federal court.
- Lead trial lawyer representing Rug Doctor on false advertising claims in federal court in Michigan and National Advertising Division (NAD) proceedings against competitor.
- Defeated TRO and complete defense award for Classified Ventures in arbitration in over contractual software platform dispute involving allegedly proprietary technology.
- Prevailed for the Chicago Cubs and a Tribune Company subsidiary in a class-action trial with substantial media attention involving allegations of ticket scalping and consumer advertising fraud. Affirmed by the Illinois Appellate Court.
- Secured complete dismissal on jurisdictional grounds for two California newspapers in an Internet defamation case by former professional athlete Bo Jackson.
- Co-chaired a multimillion US dollar breach of contract trial for insurance company, which resulted in a complete defense verdict.
- Secured an arbitration win for the makers of the George Foreman Grill, Juiceman Juicer and other housewares in a multimillion US dollar breach of contract, trademark and royalties dispute with the company's well-known spokesperson.

## Recognition

### Honors and Awards

- Named to *Best Lawyers in America* for First Amendment Litigation, 2008-2022
- *Chambers*-ranked Band One, for Media and Entertainment Litigation in Illinois, 2007-2021
- *Illinois Super Lawyers*, Top 100 Illinois Lawyers: 2008-2018; Top 50 Women Lawyers: 2009-2018
- Recognized as an "IP Star", *Managing IP's Guide*, *Euromoney Legal Guide*, 2014-2017
- *Legal 500*-ranked for Media, Technology and Telecoms, 2013-2015
- *Crain's Chicago Business*, "40 under 40: Making a Difference in Chicago," November 2010
- Heartland Alliance Annual Human Rights Award, May 2005
- *National Law Journals* "40 Under 40" list of top litigators, July 2002

## Activities and Affiliations

Natalie strongly believes in a lawyer's responsibility to support the legal aid community and provide access to justice for those in need of pro bono legal representation.

- Co-Chair of the National Immigrant Justice Center's annual Human Rights Awards, 2017-2021; Chair, Leadership Council 2001-2010; Member of Council, 2009-2015
- Member, Governing Committee of ABA Forum on Communications Law, 2017-present
- Member, The Chicago Network, 2017-present
- Member, Northern District of Illinois Magistrate Judge Merit Review Panel, 2017-2020
- President, Chicago Inn of Court, 2008-2009, member 1997-present
- President of the Chicago Bar Foundation, 2013-2014; Member of Board, 2010-2015
- Chair, Board of Directors of the Black Ensemble Theater, 2015, member 2009-2016
- Seventh Circuit Bar Association, Board of Trustees, member 2013-2015
- Founding Member, Seventh Circuit E-Discovery Committee, 2009-2010
- Leadership Greater Chicago fellow, 2002-2003

## Prior and Present Employment

- Law clerk for the Honorable Michael J. Melloy (1995), then-chief judge, US District Court for the Northern District of Iowa (now on the US Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals).

## Areas of focus

### Practices

- Class Action Defense
- Litigation and Dispute Resolution
- Real Estate Litigation and Dispute Resolution
- Intellectual Property and Technology

## Industry sectors

- Media, Entertainment and Sports
- Technology

## Education

- University of Michigan Law School, 1995, JD, *cum laude*
- University of Iowa, 1992, BA, with honors and highest distinction

## Admissions and qualifications

- Illinois
- US Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit
- US Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit
- US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit
- US Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit
- US District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan
- US District Court for the Northern District of Illinois
- US District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, Trial Bar