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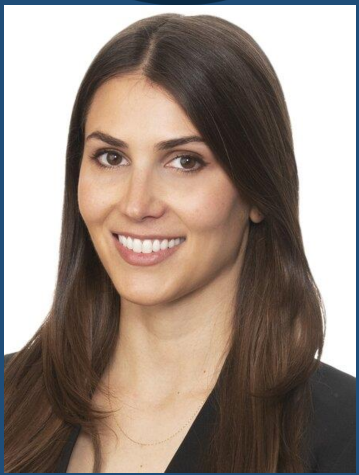
Rising Star: Cleary's Kelsey Nussenfeld

By **Al Barbarino**

Law360 (August 13, 2026, 4:03 PM EDT) -- Kelsey Nussenfeld of Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP advised Synopsys Inc. on its $35 billion acquisition of Ansys Inc. and Paramount Skydance's special committee on its pending $110 billion acquisition of Warner Bros. Discovery, helping to earn her a spot among the mergers and acquisitions practitioners under age 40 honored by Law360 as Rising Stars.



Kelsey Nussenfeld
Cleary

Age: 37
Home base: New York
Position: Partner
Law school: New York University School of Law
First job after law school: Associate at Cleary

Biggest case of her career and why it was challenging:

Nussenfeld said her role guiding Synopsys, a software maker that tests silicon chips, on its $35 billion acquisition of engineering simulation software company Ansys, a deal that closed last year after an extensive global regulatory review, was career-defining.

The combination united two leaders in semiconductor design and simulation software, capabilities that are increasingly important as semiconductor demand accelerates alongside the growth of artificial intelligence, said Nussenfeld. She said she started working on the deal in the fall of 2023 as a senior associate, and had been promoted to partner by the time the deal closed in July 2025.

"The deal was transformational for the industry, and on a personal level, it was transformational for me," Nussenfeld said. "I feel like I got to really grow up with it."

The deal presented challenges at nearly every stage, she said, involving a highly competitive auction, more than a year navigating regulatory approvals and multiple international divestitures to secure antitrust clearance.

"It's not just a big deal. It had all the complexities of a big public acquisition, including cross-border carveouts," Nussenfeld said. "You don't just need to wrap your arms around it. You need to become an expert so you can advocate on behalf of your client."

What motivates her:

For Nussenfeld, the most rewarding part of M&A isn't simply negotiating favorable terms, but finding creative solutions when everything doesn't go exactly as planned.

She said successful dealmaking requires lawyers to balance legal strategy with an understanding of the human element involved, including weighing the viewpoints of clients, opposing counsel and a range of other advisers and stakeholders.

"Your job isn't just to win every point for the client," Nussenfeld said. "You have to really understand and take into consideration multiple perspectives. You have to be able to read the room, think about what makes people tick and translate that into solutions that navigate the unexpected and get the deal closed."

Other notable cases she has worked on:

The emphasis on creativity has carried through many of Nussenfeld's other significant transactions, she said, often requiring her team to go back to the drawing board as unexpected challenges emerged.

Among them was General Mills Inc.'s $2.1 billion sale of its U.S. and Canadian yogurt businesses to two French dairy companies, Groupe Lactalis and Groupe Sodiaal, a transaction that effectively required her team to execute two cross-border carveout deals simultaneously. The deal closed last year.

One unexpected hurdle involved subdividing an industrial property in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, so General Mills could retain part of the site while transferring the Yoplait manufacturing facility to Groupe Lactalis.

"It's not as simple to subdivide an industrial lot in Tennessee as you may think," she said. "That's one thing I like about deal work: you get to encounter such novel issues on every deal."

In the case of representing Levi Strauss & Co.'s $391 million sale of its Dockers brand to Authentic Brands Group, the transaction was announced as sweeping new tariffs reshaped the global trade landscape.

"You really had to go back to the drawing board and think about how to get this deal done in such an unfavorable environment," she said. The deal closed in February of this year.

Nussenfeld has also continued advising Synopsys following the Ansys acquisition, most recently on the sale of its Processor IP Solutions business to GlobalFoundries, another worldwide carve-out requiring coordination across numerous jurisdictions.

In addition, Nussenfeld is advising the special committee of Paramount Skydance's board in connection with the company's proposed $110 billion acquisition of Warner Bros. Discovery, one of the most closely watched media transactions of the year. In that role, she has helped the independent committee evaluate financing arrangements and fulfill its fiduciary duties to shareholders.

Among other favorites, earlier in her career she guided McCormick & Co. on its $4.2 billion acquisition of the food business of British conglomerate Reckitt Benckiser Group Plc. and its $800 million acquisition of hot sauce maker The Cholula Food Co.

Why she's an M&A attorney:

Nussenfeld said she didn't expect to become an M&A lawyer when she entered law school, where the curriculum naturally emphasized litigation. But after spending time in litigation during a summer internship, she realized that she preferred the more collaborative, strategic nature of transactional work.

While deal negotiations can become contentious, Nussenfeld said, M&A lawyers ultimately share a common objective. That collaborative mindset, coupled with the fast pace of deal work, continues to make M&A the right fit for her.

"The other side may have different goals or perspectives," she said, "but it does feel like you're all working towards that shared goal of getting a deal done, and it's just a question of how."

--As told to Al Barbarino. Editing by Karin Roberts.

Law360's Rising Stars are attorneys under 40 whose legal accomplishments belie their age. A team of Law360 editors selected the 2026 Rising Stars winners after reviewing more than 1,100 submissions. Attorneys had to be under 40 as of April 30, 2026, to be eligible for this year's award.
