

# How Stris & Maher Connected With Ex-Playboy Model Who Claims Trump Affair

The origin of Karen McDougal's connection to the Los Angeles boutique: A tweet from Gibson Dunn's Ted Boutros offering legal help to defend speech rights.

By Marcia Coyle | March 23, 2018

Karen McDougal, the former Playboy model who has alleged having an affair with President Donald Trump more than a decade ago, said she is armed with “really good attorneys” to deal with whatever fallout—legal or political—comes her way.

“There could be a big lawsuit, like against me. There could be financial ruin. But that’s why I have really good attorneys to make sure that doesn’t happen,” McDougal told CNN’s Anderson Cooper [in an interview](#) aired Thursday night.



*Peter Stris*

Who's advocating for McDougal? The law firm Stris & Maher.

The litigation boutique—**well-known for appellate advocacy**—“punches above its weight,” founding partner Peter Stris said. But the firm has had to do that and more since taking on McDougal as a pro bono client.

McDougal, in the CNN interview, gave details of the alleged affair that began, she said, in 2006 and continued for 10 months until she ended the relationship. The White House **has denied** the allegation.

Stris **filed a lawsuit** earlier this week in Los Angeles Superior Court in which McDougal claims she was misled into signing an agreement with American Media Inc., which owns the National Enquirer, during the 2016 presidential campaign. The agreement, in effect, prevented her from speaking about the alleged affair. AMI has **denied her claims** and has said the contract is valid.

“Most of our cases are noteworthy because of the venue we’re in, like the U.S. Supreme Court, or because of the amount of money,” Stris told The National

Law Journal this week. “We tend to do stuff that’s big and important, but a little bit more boring.”

## A Client Relationship That Began With a Tweet

The Los Angeles-based firm’s role began, literally, because of a tweet.

Back in October 2016, after then GOP presidential nominee Trump threatened to sue news organizations reporting sexual allegations against him, **Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher** partner Theodore Boutrous tweeted an offer to defend those news outlets for free.

Later that same month, after candidate Trump attacked women speaking out against him, Boutrous **expanded his pledge**, offering to defend, **for free**, anyone sued by Trump for exercising their free speech rights.

At that point, more than 100 lawyers already had offered to join him, Boutrous recalled. One of those lawyers was Peter Stris.

“Peter was one of the first lawyers to say, ‘Count me in,’” said Boutrous, global co-chair of the firm’s litigation group and a noted First Amendment attorney.

Also aware of Boutrous’ tweets was Karen McDougal.

Shortly before Election Day in 2016, McDougal suspected she had been duped in signing the contract with AMI when The Wall Street Journal **published a story** about her and the contract. Days later, she fired her lawyer, entertainment attorney Keith Davidson, according to her lawsuit, and contacted Boutrous.



*Theodore Boutrous (Photo: Diego M. Radzinski / ALM)*

McDougal's reaching out to Boutrous "flowed from that very tweet," Boutrous said. "When I looked at that situation, it seemed to me very clear her rights to speak were being squelched. It seemed highly suspicious to me the way whole [agreement] was constructed," he said. "I got involved to help her."

Boutrous said he negotiated an amendment to her AMI contract to free her to respond to "legitimate press inquiries" about the alleged affair with Trump. But each time she sought to "set the record straight," with a news organization, AMI "has responded with threats and intimidation," according to the lawsuit.

Seeing that McDougal would need more legal help, Boutrous turned to Stris. "I had watched his work over the years," Boutrous said. "He is terrific, a great lawyer."

McDougal's case was "a natural fit for us to do it," said Stris. "We're a pretty socially-minded group. We have 15 lawyers. We do a fair bit of pro bono work in areas that mean something to us."

Going into what would be a highly visible case, Stris said he knew it would consume the firm's bandwidth "in a way almost crippling." Because the firm does handle big cases, he said, it was prepared to dedicate significant resources over weeks or months. But the representation posed one key difference, he said. "The communication side of this was unheard of to us," he said.

The firm hired a communications firm to deal with media and other aspects of the McDougal case. "We would not have been able to navigate without them," he said.

In the space of one morning this week, Stris appeared on three **morning news shows**. "It has just been a whirlwind for many of us, but for me in particular, it has been absolutely crazy," he said.

But very rewarding as well, he added. "On this one, I couldn't feel more strongly that Karen is doing the right thing," he said. "People ask, 'Is there a political agenda?' It's really very individual. She wants out of the contract." (McDougal, speaking with Cooper, said she is a Republican who voted for Trump.)

The case requires the juggling of work within the firm, Stris said.

"We're kind of used to that. Our Supreme Court cases are kind of on the low end of onerous because they're appeals," he said. "A huge piece of litigation is much more encompassing. The fact that there is a communications side to this case is what's making it so tiring now. The actual litigation is certainly not any bigger than the typical case we would do."

The firm has three cases on the Supreme Court's argument docket this term: *Digital Realty v. Somers*, **which it lost**; *U.S. Bank National Association v.*

*Village at Lakeridge*, which it won; and *Lagos v. United States*, to be argued in April. The firm has had eight arguments over the last three terms. Stris argued three of those.

Stris said he has one wish about now: “I’m hoping there’s a nap somewhere in the short term.”

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