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Rising Star: Weil's Clifford Carlson

By **Clara Geoghegan**

Law360 (August 11, 2026, 4:03 PM EDT) -- Clifford Carlson of Weil Gotshal & Manges LLP has been on the front lines of some of the most complex Chapter 11 cases filed in Houston's bankruptcy court in recent years as debtor's counsel to multistate hospital group Steward Health and car parts giant First Brands, earning him a spot among bankruptcy law practitioners under age 40 honored by Law360 as Rising Stars.

2026 LAW360 RISING STAR

Clifford Carlson
Weil

Age: 38
Home base: Houston
Position: Partner
Law school: University of Illinois College of Law
First job after law school: Clerk for U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Marvin Isgur of the Southern District of Texas

The biggest case of his career:

Steward Health was the largest private, physician-owned healthcare network in the U.S. when it filed for bankruptcy protections in the Southern District of Texas in 2024 to address over $9 billion in liabilities.

With its 31 hospitals spread across eight states and more than 30,000 workers, Steward's Chapter 11 would have impacts on communities and thousands of patients receiving care at the facilities.

Carlson said the case stands out not only for the size and complexity of the debtor's operations and capital structure, but also the high stakes involved in healthcare restructurings.

"The liquidity situation of the company when we were retained — they were really running out of money — and the fact that it was clear that the hospitals were going to need to be transitioned or sold there, and that there really wasn't one buyer that was going to buy all of the hospitals," Carlson said, listing factors that made Steward's Chapter 11 exceptional. "They were different markets and so it was really like a number of different M&A processes that were specific to geography."

Steward was able to sell and transition ownership for nearly all its hospitals, closing only two for which it was unable to find buyers, according to its Chapter 11 plan disclosure statement.

U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Christopher M. Lopez confirmed Steward's Chapter 11 plan last July, overruling a slate of opponents who argued it did not comply with Bankruptcy Code requirements that administrative creditors be paid in full upon confirmation. The plan is currently on appeal.

His proudest moment as an attorney:

In addition to being the biggest case of his career, Steward represents Carlson's proudest moment as an attorney.

"We were in a very challenging position at the beginning of the case," he said. The potential closure of Steward-owned hospitals would have meant the loss of jobs as well as the disruption in care for patients getting treatment there.

"I think successfully selling those hospitals, and then ultimately also moving forward and confirming a Chapter 11 plan" was his proudest achievement, Carlson said. "It was quite the undertaking."

Why he's a bankruptcy attorney:

Carlson was first drawn to bankruptcy practice while a student at the University of Illinois College of Law. He took five or six bankruptcy-specific courses during his second and third years of law school, Carlson remembers, which developed his interest in the practice area.

"You have to be a generalist for all the areas of law that it touches," Carlson said.

After law school, Carlson clerked for U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Marvin Isgur from 2013 to 2015. Judge Isgur was one of the founders and half of the Southern District of Texas' original mega bankruptcy panel, which sees the largest cases in the district assigned to two of its five bankruptcy judges. The mega panel has helped cement the Southern District of Texas as one of the country's top venues for complex corporate bankruptcy cases, even as it has fueled forum shopping critiques.

Carlson went on to clerk for U.S. District Judge Gray Miller of the Southern District of Texas, but said his time clerking for Judge Isgur led him back to bankruptcy when he entered private practice and joined Weil in 2016.

"I just had such an amazing experience with my clerkship with Judge Isgur, and that's what ultimately led me to Weil restructuring and doing what I do today," he said.

What motivates him:

Solving complex problems and working with others drives Carlson, and he gets plenty of both in his restructuring practice.

"What I get a lot of satisfaction out of is working with a team. A team of people in the trenches to solve a problem, to try to reach a common goal," he said. In his practice that means trying to save companies and jobs by working with people from across disciplines.

"That's what I find very rewarding," he said.

How he thinks the legal industry will change over the next 10 years:

Carlson predicts that the rise of artificial intelligence will shape how law firms operate and what clients will come to expect in bankruptcy and other areas.

"I think everyone's going to have to or have already started adapting," Carlson said. Many law firms have begun to incorporate AI into their workflows, he said, but he expects that to keep shaping how law firms operate and lawyers work over the next decade.

"It's going to demand that firms across all practices use AI, use it appropriately and responsibly, but to use it in a way that makes us far more efficient. And clients are going to demand it, or are already demanding it," Carlson said.

--As told to Clara Geoghegan. Additional reporting by Nadia Dreid, Vince Sullivan and Rick Archer. Editing by Linda Voorhis.

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.
