

New Jersey Law Journal

Ex-Prison Guard Who Became Jersey Mike's GC Returns to Mediation Roots After \$8B Blackstone Sale

By Trudy Knockless

June 12, 2025

Before he signed on as general counsel of Jersey Mike's in 2011, John Gelson had a resume full of twists and turns.

He worked as a correctional officer in a maximum-security prison in Newark, New Jersey. He co-founded a New Jersey law firm that grew to 20 attorneys. Fourteen years ago, he had just made the leap from litigator to mediator when a sandwich shop chain with a local legacy and big ambitions lured him aboard.

"I went from trial attorney to mediator to making sandwiches," Gelson quipped.

At the time, Manasquan, New Jersey-based Jersey Mike's had 300 locations. It was a lean operation with a modest legal department and a family culture.

Gelson had worked with the company as outside counsel for several years, and when he told founder and CEO Peter Cancro he planned to focus exclusively on mediation, Cancro offered him a part-time role helping to manage internal legal matters.

"I thought I'd balance that with mediation," Gelson recalled. "But then the company started growing—and growing—and pretty soon it became a full-time job."

Over the next decade and a half, Jersey Mike's exploded into a national juggernaut with more

than 3,100 stores, a clean litigation history and a loyal franchisee network.

Gelson left the company in May—three months after the private equity giant Blackstone acquired a majority stake in Jersey Mike's for a whopping \$8 billion.

Now, Gelson is preparing for a new chapter—returning to his mediation roots with a focus on franchise disputes.

Born and raised on the Jersey Shore, Gelson's connection to the area—and to Jersey Mike's—ran deep. "I grew up where the original store was located," the third-generation Notre Dame graduate said. "I was also a customer long before I ever worked with the company."

Before joining Jersey Mike's, Gelson spent 30 years as a trial attorney. Along the way, In 1995 he helped pioneer New Jersey's mediation program, a project he took on at the request of the New Jersey Supreme Court.

That role eventually drew him away from litigation.



Courtesy photo

John Gelson stepped down as General Counsel in May 2025.

"I went from arguing with people to helping them resolve things," he said. "My hair grew back. I became a calmer person."

But the opportunity to work alongside Cancro—who bought his first sub shop at age 17 and remains "one of the most respected operators in the franchise world"—proved too compelling to pass up, Gelson said.

"I really just wanted to work with Peter," Gelson said. "He had this incredible vision and integrity. And I saw it as a new challenge."

As the company expanded, the legal department stayed small, expanding from two to three attorneys, along with paralegals.

While Jersey Mike's growth dazzled the sandwich shop industry, Gelson takes particular pride in something else.

"Not a single lawsuit from a franchisee in 15 years," he said.

"That's almost unheard of in franchising," he noted. "We believed in working things out face to face. If there was an issue, I'd get on a plane and meet with the franchisee. We'd talk, not email. And Peter always supported that approach."

That mindset proved especially critical when preparing for the blockbuster Blackstone deal.

"It was a smooth process, and that's not always the case in deals like that," he said.

Gelson's legal philosophy is deeply informed by his early career in corrections and his years as a litigator.

"When people ask how I got into law, I tell them it was my time in prison," he said with a laugh—before quickly clarifying that he was a guard, not an inmate.

"That experience really influenced me," he added. "It made me want to be part of the justice system in a more impactful way. I thought I'd be

a prosecutor, but eventually I found my way to civil litigation and then mediation."

He brought a mediator's mindset to Jersey Mike's, where he teamed with Jackson Lewis to hold more than 100 free legal seminars across the country to help franchisees better understand wage-and-hour law, harassment policies and evolving workplace regulations.

"We wanted our franchisees to focus on making great subs and being profitable—not dealing with legal headaches," he said. "That was always our goal."

What Gelson says he'll miss most about Jersey Mike's is the people.

"We really were like a family," he said of the legal team and company leadership. "There was a genuine respect and camaraderie across departments—marketing, operations, supply, finance. We were growing fast, but we grew together."

He's especially proud of the company's philanthropic impact. After Gelson joined in 2011, Jersey Mike's raised more than \$113 million for nonprofits, much of it through its Month of Giving initiative. During the pandemic, the company partnered with Feeding America to raise millions of dollars.

"Just the other day, someone doing work on my house told me he tried Jersey Mike's for the first time," Gelson recalled. "I asked why, and he said, 'Because I heard about what you do for charities.' That says everything."

He said the company succeeded in part because of its commitment to "treat people fairly"—a philosophy he'll carry over to mediation.

"It's the perfect next chapter," he said. "Franchising is complex, but it's also about relationships. I think I can really help people find common ground."