

Ilene Shapiro

Extra Effort Central to Her Pioneering Family Law Career

by Dan Rafter

HIGHLAND PARK — Ilene E. Shapiro had dreams of being at the forefront of a growing trend: She wanted to be a pioneer and become part of the first real wave of female attorneys. Consider that dream reached.

Shapiro, a partner with the Chicago law firm of **Grund & Leavitt PC**, has crafted a 35-year career in the field of family law. And she's thrived at both the trial court and appellate court levels.

Reaching this goal wasn't always easy. Shapiro, like her female counterparts, had to overcome resistance from clients, attorneys and judges in what at the time was a male-dominated business. And unlike today, enrollment at law schools was not split fairly evenly among genders.

Her efforts — the long hours spent

researching cases, looking for advantages for her clients, and writing briefs — have paid off. Today, Shapiro is recognized as one of the top practitioners of family law in the state, and she boasts a practice that is constantly growing. It's a big difference from those first years Shapiro struggled through after she graduated from law school in 1978.

"Was it difficult to be a female attorney back then? It was difficult and exciting at the same time," Shapiro says. "The graduating class ahead of me was the first with a lot of women in it. So I was right on the cusp of when women started joining the profession. It took a long, long time for male lawyers and clients to become comfortable with us."

Shapiro didn't let the challenges stop her from reaching her goals. Instead, she worked diligently for her clients. Before long, her strong record of achieving positive results outweighed any concerns people had about her being a woman.

"With judges, half the battle is gaining their trust and confidence and establishing credibility with them," Shapiro says. "After they got to know me, though, I did gain that trust. It would take a while, but I did earn their respect."

That word "respect" is key. The attorneys and judges who have worked with Shapiro use it when describing her legal talents. Shapiro's peers respect her accomplishments. And they respect the way

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she's achieved her success; Shapiro is honest with clients, hard-working and ethical.

She's unfailingly well-prepared, too. Shapiro never takes shortcuts when representing her clients. And that persistence has paid off. Shapiro's list of satisfied clients is a long one.

Grace Dickler, presiding judge of the Domestic Relations Division for the Circuit Court of Cook County, first met Shapiro about 23 years ago, when the attorney first appeared before her. That first impression was overwhelmingly positive. And Dickler's appreciation of Shapiro's talents has only grown since then.

"What struck me immediately is that Ilene clearly has the best interests of her clients at heart," Dickler says. "She works extremely hard to make sure that what is fair is ultimately accomplished for her clients. She is tenacious in her representation of her clients. But on the other hand, she is also open-minded and willing to negotiate. She does not take unreasonable positions. That is a very important trait for an attorney to have."

Dickler, of course, has met many talented attorneys while presiding at the domestic relations division. But even among this skilled group, Shapiro stands out, Dickler says.

"It is the consistency of her preparedness, and it is her openness to listening to the other side's position that sets Ilene apart," Dickler says.

Seeking a Challenge

When Shapiro earned her undergraduate degree in psychology and sociology from Northwestern University, she faced a decision. She knew she wanted to further her education. But she wasn't sure how.

The thought of becoming an attorney had always appealed to her. And, Shapiro admits, the fact that women were just starting to enter the field made a career in law even more intriguing. Shapiro has never been one to back down from a challenge. "I was ready to be part of this new trend," she says.

Then there was the advice of her father, a Certified Public Accountant. He told Shapiro to follow her dreams and enter law school. Shapiro decided to take his advice, turning away from what she considered her other option, earning a Ph.D. and becoming a professor.

The move has been the obvious right choice. Shapiro still enjoys going to work each day. The reason? There are always new challenges that face her and new things to learn.

"I need a lot of intellectual stimulation to be happy," Shapiro says. "Law provides

an endless supply of that and an endless supply of challenges. I think I am very well suited to a career that comes with so many challenges. I was actually talking with one of my partners in anticipation of this interview. She told me I am a natural lawyer in that I have the right personality, skills and traits that make this a natural career for me."

Family law made sense for Shapiro, too. Her goal was to practice law in a field in which she had plenty of one-to-one interaction with people. This allows Shapiro to use her previous training in psychology and sociology.

But family law attracted Shapiro for another reason: She favors the underdog. "Like most lawyers, I always have a great deal of empathy for the underdog," Shapiro says. "The thought of trying to help people who are in a difficult predicament has always appealed to me."

When Shapiro was in her second year of law school, she met with one of her father's friends. This meeting turned out to be an important one. The friend was an attorney who took the time to talk with Shapiro about the different areas of law that might interest her.

Her father's friend also happened to have a friend of his own who practiced family law, the since-retired but veteran family law attorney Michael Kalcheim. Shapiro worked as a law clerk in Kalcheim's firm, Kalcheim & Kalcheim, Ltd., during her last two years of law school. And it was during this time that Shapiro discovered just how much she enjoyed the field.

"They let me do everything from soup to nuts," Shapiro says. "It gave me a true flavor of what a family law practice was like. I answered phones and made coffee. But I also did court runs and helped Michael draft the articles he was writing. I went to court with him and watched him argue cases. It was a great experience."

After she graduated, Shapiro went to work full-time at the firm as an associate. She worked there for several years, crafting the skills that have enabled her to build her strong practice of today.

"Michael was a wonderful mentor," Shapiro says. "In order to learn how to be a top-notch attorney, you really need a good mentor. Succeeding in the field of law requires a combination of smarts, knowledge and practical common sense. It is also somewhat of an art. You need a mentor to help you learn this. And I was fortunate. I recommend that every young attorney find someone to mentor them in the earlier years of their career."

As an example, Shapiro points to one of

the most important skills that trial attorneys can learn: how to present themselves in front of judges.

"Sometimes when arguing a case before a judge, you have to know when to stand still and be quiet," Shapiro says. "That is a judgment call. Having someone else's experience and knowledge is invaluable in making judgment calls like these. Michael spent hours coaching me and critiquing me. He instilled good habits in me. And that is what a good mentor can do."

Shapiro Found the Right Fit

Joy Feinberg of Chicago's Boyle & Feinberg says Shapiro ranks as one of the stars of Chicago's family law profession. Speaking as a former English major, Feinberg believes Shapiro's writing skills — an often-overlooked legal talent — are especially impressive.

"Ilene is brilliant. She is one of the best writers I've ever met in law," Feinberg says. "She is elegant with her presentation of materials. For someone to make a legal argument that is not only well-crafted and logical but beautifully written, that is something I really appreciate. She is just wonderful. My opinion of her abilities is very high."

While family law has turned out to be the right fit for Shapiro, that doesn't mean the field is free of challenges. As Shapiro says, family law can prove difficult day after day. Family law practitioners deal with other's most personal problems and traumas. They deal with their crises. Family law attorneys must possess inner strength. Without it, Shapiro says, they will quickly burn out.

"You have to set boundaries and not let it get to you," Shapiro says. "You need the strength to be able to tolerate the stress of this field."

Shapiro, though, has the right personality type to succeed in family law. She is detail-oriented and tenacious. She doesn't give up easily, if at all. And she's creative. That last point is a key to Shapiro's success.

"When things don't go my way, I think of other approaches and angles," she says. "I'm not intimidated by complex issues."

Shapiro also boasts a love for learning that is valuable in her practice. Family law is far from a stagnant field. It is constantly changing and evolving. Shapiro enjoys this, and considers the opportunity to continually learn new things to be a prime benefit of family law.

Finally, there's the one trait that far too many attorneys underestimate: compassion. "I have a lot of compassion for people," Shapiro says. "That is very important. You have to be sensitive to what others are

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going through. That's a trait you really do need in this field."

Shapiro says she enjoys her current relationship with Grund & Leavitt. "I feel honored to work with such superlative lawyers as David Grund and Marvin Leavitt and to be a part of their wonderful firm," Shapiro says. "Even after practicing law for as long as I have, I have learned so much from working with them. We have amazing talent in our firm. It is like a legal think tank."

Exactly how creative can Shapiro get? Consider one case. Shapiro's client saw strange photos on her husband's cell phone, shots of him and another woman who happened to be wearing a wedding gown. She also found photos of this same woman showing off what appeared to be a new engagement ring.

Shapiro went to work and eventually uncovered a YouTube video showing her client's husband participating in a wedding ceremony with another woman, a ceremony that was taking place in Mexico. The YouTube video was allowed into evidence, a first for Shapiro.

The result? The judge found that the client's husband was not a credible witness. Shapiro also found other evidence that the husband was not honest. He had been deceitful, for example, in his financial dealings. With this groundwork set, Shapiro's client enjoyed a positive outcome in the case. Her husband was denied maintenance.

"I invest a lot in my cases," Shapiro says. "I put in a lot of time and effort and energy. When I get a good outcome, I am thrilled. I am happy for the client, and it makes me feel good about what I do."

Is there a secret formula to Shapiro's success? Not really, unless you consider working hard a secret. As Shapiro says, when she first entered law, she had to be twice as good as the male lawyers who populated the industry.

"And this might still be true today," Shapiro says. "That is unfortunate, but it is the reality. This is still a man's world to a large extent. That is my opinion, anyway.

"The key to this career is to be well-prepared. Preparation is the name of the game. I always strive for excellence. I always think of how I can improve my practice, what I can do differently to improve my performance. I always try to learn new things." ■