

WOMEN of ♀ Influence

In a field once dominated by men, female attorneys have risen to the top of their profession. We asked attorneys from three all-female family law firms about their experiences, and whether gender has affected how they practice law.

By Diana Shepherd, Divorce Financial Analyst

Gender equality has been in the news in the last few months: the 2016 “Global Gender Gap Report” by the World Economic Forum revealed that it would take another 170 years to reach economic gender equity, if change continues at its current rate; Google “Did Hillary Clinton lose because she is a woman?” and you will get 19,400,000 results; and on January 21, Women’s Marches took place around the world. The reinvigoration of the women’s movement inspired us to ask four very successful female family lawyers what it has taken for them to rise to the top, and what role – if any – gender plays in their practices.

The Good Old Days?

Janet Boyle, an experienced family lawyer and co-founder of Chicago’s Boyle Feinberg, an all-female law firm with 6 attorneys, notes that women in numbers first started going to law school and entering the profession in the 70s and 80s. “I was often minimized; women were not readily accepted as equals.” She experienced being called “honey” and “dear,” and the internal fear that

those gray-haired males who dominated the legal profession might be right: that she was an imposter, and not as good as the men. “Yes, we had to be tougher, stronger, and more prepared, but too many women tried to mimic men: dress like them, cuss like them, and fight like them,” she remembers. “It was hard to figure out how to be feminine while being strong.” As a trailblazer, Janet fought her way up against the prevailing belief that she must have a male boss who was allowing her to “play at being a lawyer” to being an attorney with a top reputation – and her own boss.

Janet’s partner, Joy Feinberg, says her first female role model was her strong single mother. An avowed feminist, Joy’s mother never allowed any excuse to keep her or her children from believing that anything was possible. When Joy first started trying cases within two weeks of becoming a lawyer, the “joke” at that time was, “Ms. Feinberg is prepared for trial. Why can’t any of you men be prepared like her?” She also remembers that “There would have been five women in that courtroom if every woman who practiced in the field had been present.” When Joy became a divorce lawyer,

she found some great female judges to guide her. “Judge Monica Reynolds put me into a weekend family program to learn about the destruction of the entire family from the alcoholic or drug user, and Judge Susan Snow told me that I needed to learn to get along with the guys.” Judge Snow insisted that Joy join her coed divorce lawyer softball team; Joy learned strategy about baseball, which would sometimes translate into case strategies.

The Female Advantage

New Jersey attorney Allison Williams believes that women family lawyers actually have an advantage over their male counterparts. “Most women have been taught since childhood to be ‘feminine’: to collaborate, cooperate, share, and seek consensus,” she asserts. “Most men have been taught since childhood to be ‘masculine’: hierarchical, directing, authoritative, to seek dominance, and to win. Masculine characteristics form the foundation of our adversarial legal system.”

Allison says that women attorneys had to learn and master those masculine attributes. “But we still have our innate

Cont. on page 28

feminine attributes – which gives us a significant advantage in family law practice. Women attorneys can offer the best of their natural feminine attributes as well as the best of their learned masculine attributes.” Women attorneys can be competitive and aggressively pursue “the win” in litigation, she says, but they can be equally successful with negotiated settlements.

The founder of Williams Law Group, Allison sees definite advantages in having an all-female workplace – for the partners and associates. “Men are usually less shy about acknowledging their accomplishments and downplaying their development areas than women are,” she says. “In our firm, the attorneys can be vocal about their own successes and promote their own advancement without the ever-so-subtle backlash from male colleagues.”

The attorneys and clients share the experience of being female in a world that “celebrates patriarchy and maleness,” says Allison. “The experience of being spoken over, looked past, and being criticized for the mere act of disagreeing is disempowering – and we can relate to that.” She thinks that unspoken commonality creates a connection between attorney and client that makes the client’s experience better. “Feeling resigned to a certain level of disrespect inherent in merely existing in a female body is a common theme for women – and in family law litigation. The law is often an abusive place for many, attorneys included. Our office is the antidote to that.”

The Legal Profession Reflects New Cultural Norms

Although their original plan was not to have an all-woman firm, in the 20+ years since New Jersey family law firm Shimalla, Wechsler, Lepp & D’Onofrio was founded, “fewer than five men approached us for jobs or even responded to ads for associates,” says partner Amy Wechsler.

Since all four partners developed

their legal careers while raising young children, they have always been supportive of each other’s needs to balance work life and family life. “Years ago, when we started our careers at firms managed by men, we did not encounter respect for our commitment to raising families while working as lawyers,” says Amy. “We were afraid to say we had to leave court early for a child’s

gender is not usually one of the reasons they give,” says Amy. “Essentially, clients hire us because they think we will advocate effectively for their best interests and do a good job for them.”

Extending Their Influence

Some of the best advice the partners at Shimalla, Wechsler, Lepp & D’Onofrio can give young women is to get involved in the legal community. Amy says they have all benefited from involvement, networking and taking on leadership roles in their county and state bar associations.

Each week, the attorneys in Allison’s law firm have the opportunity to meet with a senior attorney for mentoring. “Mentoring comes not just from the top down, but from an atmosphere where each and every person contributes to the success of every other member on the team,” she says.

Janet, who has a Masters in Taxation, and Joy, who has helped the profession and judges re-think the philosophy on how to divide pensions, take the concept of women being highly competent in the financial aspects of divorce seriously. In 2016, they offered a series of 12 lectures on divorce financial Issues to other female divorce lawyers. Joy and Janet also mentor their firm’s younger attorneys by having them participate in week-long trial advocacy training, year-long coaching sessions to be rainmakers, and by giving them opportunities to speak and write. “We are really good at what we do, but we always strive to get better,” Janet says. “It’s what we do: we are women.” ■



Clockwise from top: Amy Wechsler, Janet Boyle, Joy Feinberg, and Allison Williams.

appointment or activity. Today, lawyers and even judges make time for family events. Over the last few decades, as more women have taken on leadership roles in the legal profession, and men are more active in raising their children, emerging societal norms have generated support of work-life balance for both men and women,” Amy points out.

Although all their attorneys are women, the ratio of male to female clients has consistently been about even. “When clients tell us why they chose our firm, our

This article has been edited for space; to read the full responses to our questions, visit www.familylawyermagazine.com/articles/women-of-influence-full-answers



Diana Shepherd (CFA®) is the Editorial Director of Family Lawyer Magazine and a co-founder of Divorce Marketing Group.