

# Leslie Fineberg

## Direct Approach Helps Divorce Clients Realize Their Exit Strategies

by Elizabeth Davies



When divorce clients walk through Leslie J. Fineberg's door at **Nottage and Ward**, they usually are at a low point in their lives.

Fineberg sees it as a chance to help them start a new life.

"I love helping people find the next phase of life," she says. "Divorce is a death, but then there's an afterlife. You get to redefine who you are."

With over 20 years of experience in family law, Fineberg is the managing partner at Nottage and Ward and is committed to helping families make the adjustments they need to move forward in life. She says a good divorce lawyer is not only an advocate, but someone who can discern the right time for tough love — or just to be a good listener.

"Divorce is 50 percent law and 50 percent psychology," says Fineberg. "It's the emotions and ups and downs of being human. One of the toughest parts is figuring out what kind of counselor of law to be for that client."

### Growing up a Child of Divorce

Fineberg's life experience plays into her job as a divorce lawyer. She was 3 when her parents divorced and 10 when she moved with her mother and brother from Florida to Chicago.

Her parents gave her a model of how divorces can be done well, she adds.

"I know that it's possible to be divorced and to give your child stability and self-confidence, even with two homes," she says.

Fineberg's parents did an exceptional job of co-parenting, and she recalls her dad even sleeping on the sofa when he would come to visit them in Chicago.

"My parents had the perfect divorce," she says. "That's what I aspire for my clients. They co-parented perfectly. We always felt we were loved by both of them."

That influence carries through to her work today. Firm founder Rosaire Nottage says Fineberg stands out for her ability to help clients see the big picture.

"You try to preserve some respect looking into the future, and she's very

good at that," Nottage says. "We could use more of that in divorce cases."

Fineberg's father suggested she go to law school: "He thought it was a good profession for a girl," she says. But she started out pursuing psychiatry. As she got further into school, she realized she didn't really want to go to medical school.

Besides, she had worked as a production assistant for two semesters on a television show by Harvard Law professor Arthur Miller, called *Headlines on Trial*. The experience captured her attention.

"What drew me to the law from working at *Headlines on Trial* was seeing how one's perspective of the facts or the story could be set or swayed by the words used to tell the story," she says. "A story gets its life by the precision with which you choose your words."

Fineberg attended the University of Miami School of Law, taking a heavy course load of family law classes. She enjoyed them, so she took a job as a Cook

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County assistant state's attorney, focusing on custody, support and domestic violence cases. She later worked as special attorney general in child support enforcement cases.

"You see the highs and lows of society," she says. "It really teaches you to relate to people from all walks of life."

She also took on juvenile cases, which was difficult work emotionally.

"I would watch the news and pray one of my kids wasn't on there," she recalls.

Fineberg joined Nottage and Ward on the invitation of Nottage, who knew her from the rather tight-knit Chicago divorce community. Nottage respected the way Fineberg wasn't rattled the first time they met.

"What I liked about Leslie is how she handled me," Nottage says. "I have a reputation for being tough. She just kept going, and I thought, 'Good for her, she didn't take the bait.' She doesn't crumble, doesn't get nervous. She keeps her head. I liked that quality a lot."

Her steady approach to an often-volatile field is a benefit to her clients, Nottage says.

"Divorce can be pretty high-pressure," she says. "Judges get upset, clients get upset, lawyers get upset. Maybe once in six years, I have seen her frazzled. She's good at getting people to like her."

Today, Fineberg appreciates her role at Nottage & Ward, in part because of the friendly atmosphere that lets her collaborate with other lawyers in the practice.

"Assigning a client's case to an attorney doesn't mean the attorney is the only voice involved in that case," she says. "We constantly communicate with all of the attorneys in the office, collaborating on each case so each client gets a broad range of experience and advice."

## **Focusing on Family Law**

Today, Fineberg focuses on divorce cases, along with mediation, adoption, custody and paternity. She handles about 30 cases at any given time. The average divorce takes about 18 months. She is traditionally a litigator, but also is trained as a mediator and in collaborative law.

"It's a grief process," she says. "Until everybody has gone through that grief, they aren't ready to let the marriage go."

Dealing with clients while they are in such a fragile state can be a challenge, but Fineberg makes a point of keeping an emotional arm's length.

"You can't get in the boat with your client," she says. "You lose perspective."

It's her responsibility to help her client transition to a new identity, and that can

be particularly difficult when children are involved or for a stay-at-home parent who suddenly has to relinquish part-time control of that job.

"It's very important to help your client find an identity separate from being a parent," she says.

Another challenge in family law is digging through the he-said-she-said to find the truth.

"It's almost impossible," Fineberg says. "Most people don't intend to lie. They actually believe what they're saying. Everybody just has their own recollection. How something makes you feel helps you mold your version of events."

Still, the work is deeply gratifying. Fineberg is quick to recall a case of two parents with substance abuse problems. She saw a father who overcame his demons and rebuilt his life for the sake of his son. That man, who has sole custody of his son, recently celebrated 10 years of sobriety.

"It was amazing to help him do that," she says. "When I got into the case, there were supervised visits on both sides. It was amazing to see the transformation from the time I stepped into the case, to seeing it years later."

Nottage says Fineberg's ability to look at a case from a different angle and come up with unique solutions is noteworthy.

She recalls a case where a couple owned a restaurant and were fighting over the variable revenue from the business. Fineberg suggested that rather than trying to split the business revenue, which was unsteady, they instead each take a percentage of the income from the slot machines inside the restaurant.

"Our client was happy because it was impossible to cheat, and it was a steady stream of income," Nottage says. "When she came up with that formula, everyone felt good about it."

Fineberg deals with more than divorces. Alyssa Mogul, partner at Grund & Leavitt, P.C., particularly praises Fineberg's ability to successfully negotiate prenuptial agreements.

"This is a very delicate endeavor, and all clients of couples who used her services were married on time," Mogul recalls. "She is well-versed in the law and is very good at client management."

## **A Lawyer and a Mother**

Six years ago, Fineberg added a new role to her life: She became the mother of Joey.

Fineberg's favorite pastime these days is spending time with Joey — swimming, going to the museum or visiting a theater. She serves on the community board of the Emerald City Theater and works on its One Fund committee to bring theater

experiences to inner-city youth.

"OneFund was created to help address a literacy crisis by inspiring early learners through play and reading," she says. "OneFund is an annual campaign supporting Emerald City programs that bring a free plan and a free book to qualifying low-income Chicago Public School students."

Becoming a mother didn't change the way Fineberg practiced law, but it has changed the way some clients see her.

"Before I had a child, I think clients didn't think I could relate," she says. "Reality doesn't necessarily match their perception. My experience as a child of divorce is probably more influential in how I approach things."

As she progresses through a case, Fineberg tries to keep the end in mind. She knows that clients are highly emotional and trust her to guide them through the process.

"It's about developing an exit strategy with a client and helping them get to that goal," she says.

Andy Levine is a partner with the law firm of O'Rourke and Moody. He met Fineberg when he retained her to represent him in a divorce last year.

"Leslie is practical and is very skilled in counseling clients in an area of the law that often seems to be more about emotion and anger than rational decision-making," Levine says.

"In the area of divorce, I think it is critical to be represented by an attorney who will counsel the client against getting too wrapped up in the inevitable and aggravating personal issues that will ultimately have little legal significance.

"Leslie is...focused on the big picture instead of getting stuck in the distraction of the day."

And indeed, those who know Fineberg say her personality has a sincere charm that soothes clients and opposing parties alike.

"Leslie has a unique and very effective way of being direct and to-the-point in a kind of chummy way that is disarming and doesn't feel confrontational," says client Steve Subar, managing director of z2m4 Advisors, Inc., a management consulting firm.

"What she has to say might not always be what you would have preferred or liked to hear," he explains.

"Regardless, Leslie says it the way it is, with a focus on how to make the best of it." ■