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Personal experience

Fineberg uses the 'perfect divorce' her parents went through as an example for her clients

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Leslie J. Fineberg's parents split up when she was 3 years old. But that wasn't a bad thing. "My parents had the perfect divorce," said Fineberg, managing partner of Nottage and Ward LLP. "They were much better divorced than they were married. They always got along well and put on a united front for the kids."

Fineberg now uses that experience as an example when working with clients in her own practice at the seven-lawyer boutique.

"We're in the most personal and emotional area of the law that exists," she said. "Our clients come in and they spread their life before us — the good, the bad, the ugly."

"They have to be treated with respect, know that they are being heard and know that they have an advocate."

Along those lines, the firm's lawyers are expected to reply to client messages the same day or within 24 hours.

"I hold myself to the same standards as I hold other people to, which makes it easy for everyone to know what's expected of them," Fineberg said. "Everybody is expected to bill a certain number of hours depending on their position in the firm and everybody is expected to maintain a high level of communication."

Fineberg became the firm's managing partner in August 2012. She views her role as facilitating "everyone else's ability to do a good job for our clients."

She also aims to stay on top of developments and trends in technology and the law as well as

services that are available to the firm and its clients.

Fineberg is also responsible for the firm's budget, insurance needs and hiring.

Nottage and Ward, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary, focuses on family law, which includes divorce, custody, paternity, civil unions, domestic partnerships, prenuptial and post-nuptial agreements and adoption matters.

The firm's founders are Rosaire M. Nottage and Eunice Ward.

"They were two strong pioneers who braved the old boys' club, made their mark and developed a model where we can provide the best services for less money," Fineberg said.

While the hourly rates for the firm's attorneys range from \$200 to \$525, it doesn't use secretaries or recording devices.

"We have created an environment where the attorneys are able to do their own work," Fineberg said. "Our computers, our various applications and cloud-based services have become our secretaries. We are working toward becoming paperless."

The firm uses cloud-based services for timekeeping, contact information and updating client files.

Nottage and Ward also has an interest in having its lawyers trained in collaborative law, a method of alternative dispute resolution, Fineberg said.

Ward said Fineberg devises creative ideas to help resolve divorce cases.

"She's not just relying on the tried and true," Ward said.

Fineberg maintains a watchful eye in order to keep the firm's overhead expenses low, Ward said.



Leslie J. Fineberg

Managing Partner, Nottage and Ward LLP

- **Location:** Chicago
- **Size:** Declined to reveal 2012 revenues
- **Lawyers:** 7
- **Age:** 47
- **Law school:** University of Miami School of Law, 1991
- **Organizations:** Member, community board of Emerald City Theatre Co.
- **Interests:** Volunteering at her young daughter's school, attending theater and cultural events

Fineberg "takes a strong role in her cases but she knows how to work with the other lawyers," Ward said. "She has a good, congenial way with opposing counsels."

The firm operates on a vertically integrated model, Fineberg said. Each case is usually staffed by two lawyers, typically a partner and associate.

"Unlike a lot of other firms, the top always knows what the bottom's doing and vice versa," Fineberg said.

"We like to provide an environment for a client to call any attorney who is working on their case and be assured that attorney is going to know what is going on with every issue and be able to address the client's concerns," she said.

The firm has four partners and three associates. Two lawyers were hired in 2012, though none have been added yet this year. Nottage and Ward also retains contract lawyers on a couple of cases each year.

"We do not have a high turnover," Fineberg said.

Michael A. Haber, a partner at Kalcheim, Haber LLC, got to know Fineberg since she joined Nottage and Ward seven years ago.

He's opposed her in two cases and described her as practical and tenacious.

"She has a knack for what is important in a case, focusing on that and not getting distracted by some of the minutiae that we are often faced with," he said.

Haber also jointly represented a client along with Fineberg in a divorce case, a highly emotional situation for clients.

"She has the ability to be sensitive to an emotional reaction," he said. "But, at the same time, she has the strength to lead the client to a more objective view."

Fineberg, a Miami native, moved with her mother and brother to Chicago in 1976.

She attended the University of Miami School of Law. During her second semester there, she took a domestic relations law class and became interested in that area.

"After taking the classes and reading all the appellate cases about how badly people divorced," she said, "I knew from experience that there could be a positive outcome from the divorce and that children did not have to be pawns in the process."

After graduating from law school in 1991, Fineberg returned to Chicago, then took and passed the Illinois bar exam.

She joined the Cook County state's attorney's office where she worked on family law matters, including child support enforcement. She left the state's attorney's office in 1997 and joined The Muller Firm Ltd., where she remained until 2003.

She next worked at the Law Offices of Debra DiMaggio for three years. Fineberg joined Nottage and Ward as a partner in 2006.

And while she typically works with couples who are splitting up, Fineberg considers herself a good matchmaker. Four couples she connected are still married.

She also once recommended someone she met at a business luncheon to a client looking to fill a business position.

"I'm a really good judge of which people are going to click," Fineberg said, "whether as friends, business colleagues or romantically."

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