

LEGAL MIND, COMPASSIONATE HEART

COLLEEN BARBERIS' EDUCATION IN THE LAW BEGAN AT AN EARLY AGE

by Robb Fulcher

Colleen Barberis was born to the law. She has it in her blood, through attorney relatives including her mother Patricia Barberis. She had it through her formative years, soaking in the atmosphere of her mom's law office and pitching in to work when she was in high school. And she has it in her inborn drive to help others, at times when that help is needed most.

Barberis is the daughter half of a mother-daughter legal team that combines knowledge, skill and experience with compassionate attention to clients who face the stresses of divorce, child custody and other matters of family law.

The Torrance attorneys bring toughness and tenacity to the settlement table, mediation sessions and the courtroom – stages for the often complex struggles over alimony, child support, visitation, paternity, relocation, domestic violence and divorce, sometimes with high-stakes assets.

Learning the law

When Colleen Barberis was a teenager, and classes let out at Bishop Montgomery High School, she would walk down Torrance Boulevard to her mom's law office.

"I was always around the office, I spent a lot of time there after school. I absorbed the atmosphere around me, and I saw that the biggest aspect is helping people in times of need," she said.

"I began answering phones, doing filing, things like that. I loved the people. I knew I wanted to do something in my life that was helpful to people."

She went on to UC Santa Barbara and Oral Roberts University, studying English literature.

"I loved to read. I loved learning," she said.

She began working as a technical writer and editor for a medical/legal firm, and got married. While working, she started law school at the University of West Los Angeles.

Then came a turning point. She was taking time off work to have her first child when the Rodney King riots broke out in L.A., and fire consumed the building where Barberis worked.

That marked the end of her technical writing, and the beginning of a fulltime commitment to the law. The sea change had been bubbling away under the surface and the fire just made it official.

She worked as an appellate clerk for the county council, Department of Children and Family Services while she was graduating from law school in the top five percent of her class.

Then she joined the Barberis firm, working seamlessly with her



like-minded mom, a one-time registered nurse who also makes compassion her legal watchword.

All in the family

Clients facing divorce and custody issues sometimes come to the lawyers too hurt, confused and angry to take a practical look at their legal options. When they sit down with a Barberis, they're allowed to tell their stories the way they want to, with all the history, all the emotions, so the lawyers can find out what's important to their clients, and go from that starting point to address the legal issues.

Colleen Barberis has served as minor's counsel on difficult cases, interviewing parents and relevant witnesses, sometimes visiting the child's home and school, and reporting her findings to the court.

"These are difficult cases. It's beyond typical parental conflict. It can involve harsh allegations," she said.

"One of my most difficult cases was a teenager who had attempted suicide because she was so unhappy," Barberis said. "I visited her in the hospital several times. There was a happy ending to the case."

In a sign of the cyber age, Barberis had the uncomfortable experience of being followed – too tenaciously, she thought – on social media by a man involved in a child custody case. The man was ultimately unsuccessful in his custody bid.

Change for the better

The generation gap between the Barberis attorneys shows great progress in the lot of the female lawyer.

"Many years ago, law was not an open field to women," Patricia said. "Most women in my generation could become a registered nurse, a social worker, a secretary. Female lawyers were few and far between. Once the doors opened, they came flooding in."

By the time Colleen went to law school, nearly half of the graduates were women.

"It's gender neutral," she said.

"Many of the top judicial officers in family law are women, including the supervising judge, and they all serve as great role models," Barberis said.

Barberis also has served as a mediator for the Los Angeles County Court, and as a presenter for a mock trial South West Branch, LE County Court.

She is a member of the Torrance Historical Society, and is married 20 years with three children. All of the children have worked in the family business.

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