

Judicious choices

Attorneys find achievement and contentment in their chosen fields

by Robb Fulcher

Sharon Bryan and Rebecca Schroff chose different legal specialties, but wound up peas in a pod as successful, contented lawyers, partners in the same firm, who both make their homes in Palos Verdes Estates.

Both were voted by their peers to join the ranks of "Southern California Super Lawyers," according to results published by Los Angeles magazine. Both have earned the highest recognition possible for legal ability and ethical standards by Martindale-Hubbell, a firm that uses peer ratings to help people looking for legal help.

Bryan found her way to a partnership with Moore, Bryan & Schroff of Torrance through the practice of family law, and Schroff found her way through the practice of estate planning. Both specialties require analytic ability, legal knowledge and empathy, but there are differences: Bryan routinely employs her strategies in courtrooms, while Schroff works out the puzzles given to her mostly outside the litigation arena.

Strong advocate

Bryan's family law cases typically involve several initial court appearances, over matters such as spousal or child support.

"The more economically advantaged spouse might not believe they will have to pay that much, until they hear it from a judicial officer. And the less advantaged spouse gets realistic as well," Bryan said.

In the end, almost all family law cases are settled outside the courtroom.

"There is an old adage that criminal attorneys see bad people at their best, and family law attorneys see good people at their worst," she said.

"It is a people business. I really like my clients. They're all different, and some of them are sort of difficult, but if they just trust in me we'll reach our goal," she said.

Clients often believe they know how their cases should be approached, and Bryan's expertise is crucial in such cases.



Sharon Bryan.

"Law is a lot about strategy," she said.

"I really like what I do," Bryan said. "It involves people, helping them at what is really one of the worst times in their lives, like when they are on the cusp of divorce or separation," she said.

Clients come to Bryan with fears that they won't wind up okay financially, or they won't be able to secure adequate time with their children.

"You take them from where they start out, in a distraught state, and you see them out the door a bit later, financially secure and with the feeling they can start over," she said.

"People write me, sometimes they bring flowers," Bryan said, recalling a letter from a past client marking the graduation of her children from college.

The cases might be simple ones, or they might involve complicated asset questions concerning copyrights, patents, or ranches in Australia, for instance.

"It's a really interesting practice we have," Bryan said.

"I think Sharon is very much an advocate for her client," Schroff said of her law partner. "Family law is much more litigation than my area, and she is a very strong



Photos by David Fairchild.
Rebecca Schroff.

advocate for her clients, and has great knowledge of the law."

In control

Schroff's area is estate planning – estates, trusts, probate, that kind of thing – helping families and individuals create plans they are comfortable with, and helping them determine how to dispose of their assets after they are gone.

"I got into this area and really enjoyed it," she said. "I've just been happy and there was no need to move around."

Attention to detail is important as she works out financial puzzles, and empathy with clients is necessary as well.

"We're dealing with families to solve their problems," she said.

Schroff said being a woman in the law "has not been an obstacle."

"When I was first practicing there were probably fewer women, but in some ways that could be beneficial. Clients, women usually, often say they want to deal with a woman – they believe she understands what they are going through."

Schroff said people's personalities emerge in interesting ways during the administration of the trust of a deceased relative.

"It's not a boring job by any means," she said.

Trust administration doesn't play out like it does in the movies, which are full of suspenseful scenes in a lawyer's office.

"People don't say 'When are we going to read the will?' and then gather around a table, although I suppose you could," she said. "We mail them a copy of the will. There's nobody sitting around a table with surprised faces."

Most clients' first contact with Schroff comes when they call to say something like "My parent has just died. I need to know how to handle their assets. I think I'm in charge and I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

She was asked, if we had a window on her world – seeing people handle the assets of their deceased loved ones – would we be heartened or disheartened at their general behavior?

"It would be both. Sometimes we have people who just cannot get along, and weren't getting along before the relative died, and sometimes working with the family is easy, everyone is getting along and everyone is supportive of each other," she said.

"You might be amazed at how well they work together, and amazed at how they don't work together," she said.

After a pause, she tipped the scales easily in favor of the human race.

"There are also people we don't see very much, because they don't need much from us," she said. "Most people are great at a very difficult time, when someone dies who they are really close to."

"Becky is wonderful," Bryan said of her law partner. "She's very knowledgeable of the law, very capable in preparing complex estate plans for people, as well as the simpler ones. It's a good personality fit. She's always our calm one, always in control."