

ELIZABETH LAZZARA

Early Courtroom Lesson Keeps Family Law Trial Attorney Well Prepared

by Steve Metsch

Elizabeth Olen Lazzara of the law firm of Aronberg Goldgehn learned early on in her career that preparation is the key to being a successful attorney.

After graduating from Loyola University, New Orleans, College of Law, Lazzara was admitted to the Illinois Bar in 1991. She began her career in family law in 1992 when she went to work for a sole family law practitioner in Chicago.

“Although I had no experience in family law, what appealed to me was the opportunity to dive right in,” she recalls.

Almost immediately, Lazzara learned what would be the most valuable lesson of her career, one that has been the foundation of her practice ever since. In the first week of her employment, her boss sent her to court “to get a date” on a case.

“The case was in front of now deceased Judge Herman Knell, a seasoned judge who was a bit of a character,” Lazzara recalls. “When I told him that I needed a date, he looked at me and asked, ‘What kind of date?’ He then asked, ‘a trial date?’

“Not having a clue about what to do or without having any information about the case, I said ‘OK.’ I remember him laughing as I walked away,” she says.

“When I got back to the office, my boss let me have it and then marched me right back to Judge Knell’s courtroom. When we stepped back up in front of him, they both had a good laugh at my expense.

“I was mortified by the experience. I hate making mistakes. I thought, ‘I will never, ever walk into a courtroom unprepared again.’ Since then, I have made it my mission to be the most prepared person in the room,” she says.

‘SHE’S REALLY A PIT BULL’

Attorney Donald Angelini, a partner in Angelini, Mills, Woods & Ori, has often gone toe-to-toe with Lazzara.

“She probably had you call me because she always beats me,” Angelini says with a hearty laugh.

“I’ve tried a number of cases against Elizabeth over the years. She’s an excellent



lawyer, a good writer, very talented and quick on her feet.”

Angelini cautions other lawyers that appearances often are deceiving: “She looks so unassuming. She comes off like a school teacher, but she’s really a pit bull.”

Asked if he’s ever prevailed, Angelini pauses and says, “There are times you think you do. And then you look at the order and think, ‘Oh, my God, I thought I won that motion.’ She’s an advocate to the very end.”

It’s clear to him that Lazzara “cares and does not like to lose on anything.”

In her career, besides winning many rulings, she has won many honors.

She holds the AV Peer Review Rating from Martindale-Hubbell, its highest rating for ethics and legal ability. She has been recognized as a 10 Best For Client Satisfaction by the American Institute of Family Law Attorneys. She has been named a Leading Lawyer in family law by Leading Lawyers since its inception in 2003. She has been named an Illinois Super Lawyer in family law. But all the awards and honors don’t mean that much

to her.

“I have been practicing exclusively in family law for 26 years. Sometimes it is a grueling practice, heated and emotional. But I love the legal challenges and the twists and turns in the law,” she says.

She especially enjoys “the camaraderie, my colleagues, a good legal argument and interacting with professionals in court every day.

“It sounds cliché, but the most rewarding cases to me are the ones where I can assist someone who really needs my help,” she adds.

“I am most zealous and emotional when I am representing and assisting a victim of domestic violence. I am proud to use my skills to protect their interests, assuring them that their voice is heard.” Lazzara says.

A current client whose first name is Elisabeth says Lazzara “has helped her with an ongoing issue.”

“She’s very proactive. She offers appropriate solutions. She is very professional and very prepared,” the woman says. “She is very real about what can and can’t be done.”

Elisabeth hired Lazzara based on a reference

from a friend. “I was looking for someone who understood their job and a lawyer who has a very good reputation.”

“My case is so off the wall and unique. It’s been 8½ years. He continues to try and hurt me,” she says. But with Lazzara leading the fight, things are improving.

LESSONS LEARNED GROWING UP

Strong lessons from her own family helped shape her professionally. Lazzara grew up in Des Plaines in a large Catholic family. She is one of seven children, and she learned early on the value of hard work.

“My mother and father kept us in line. We all had our jobs to do.”

From her parents, Lazzara learned firsthand the importance of hard work and of helping those in need.

“My father taught me the value of hard work, stubborn tenacity and resourcefulness. My mother is the definition of service and compassion. Despite our full house, she was and is always available to assist anyone in need. I spend every day aspiring to be like them.”

Lazzara, 54, graduated from Maine West High School in Des Plaines and received a bachelor’s degree in English from John Carroll University in Cleveland before going on to law school.

“I was going to be a doctor, a pediatrician. I wanted to be Marcus Welby,” she says, referring to the 1970s TV character.

“The science classes proved too much for me. I love to write, so my academic counselor suggested law school, and I’ve never looked back.

“Law school was tough. I was broke and alone. My moped was stolen in the first two weeks I was there, and I had about \$5 a week to spend on groceries.”

“I could get five cans of tuna for a dollar” she recalls. Instant oatmeal, instant rice and crackers were on her grocery list, too.

LOOKING BACK, NO REGRETS

She’s enjoyed her decision to working in family law and, through the years, has learned from other attorneys.

“I learned how to practice law by observing. I also learned how not to practice. You see those who are respected, those who really do well and work hard. Then you observe very bad behavior, and you make your own path.”

The learning never ends. In 2014, Lazzara completed the Divorce Mediation Skills Training Course at Northwestern University.

Nor do the honors. Earlier this year, she was named by Crain’s Custom Media as a Notable Woman Lawyer in Chicago.

Lazzara regularly publishes and lectures on

family law and considers herself fortunate to have joined the law firm 20 years ago, where she has been a member since 2000. After answering a blind ad, she was introduced by now-retired partner Mel Blum.

“Mel wasn’t a divorce practitioner. He was a general corporate practitioner who wanted someone with family law experience to assist clients who may have family law needs.

“Mel is a true gentleman and so well respected, and it was his personality and the firm’s culture that drew me in,” Lazzara says.

“Twenty years later, I am fortunate to be able to continue my practice in such a loyal, reputable, respected environment.” Lazzara serves as the co-chair of the firm’s domestic relations practice and as the co-chair of the group’s Women’s Initiative.

Those years of experience have paid off with her tenacity, Angelini says.

“She fights down to every period and comma of an order. That’s her nature,” says Angelini. “But she’s never mean or unethical. She’s just a fighter, a very tough negotiator.”

PLEASURE TO SEE HER IN COURT

“Let’s put it like this, she’s somebody I would refer my closest relatives to,” says Angelini, who has practiced law for 31 years.

The view from the bench is much the same. Retired Cook County Circuit Judge Barbara Meyer, on the bench from 2002 to 2013, says Lazzara “is competent, doesn’t play games or try to manipulate, and is extremely professional.”

“It was a pleasure going into the courtroom knowing she was going to be there,” Meyer says. “There were no silly arguments.

“I recall a child support issue. She stayed on the issues with her professionalism no matter what the other side did. It’s a tremendous thing. You don’t always see that,” Meyer says.

“She represents her clients to the fullest but doesn’t take on their personalities,” says Meyer. “That was important to me on the bench. I’d see attorneys get up there and become their clients. She represented them as she should as an advocate, and she did her job.”

That client named Elisabeth agrees. “She’s been a rock for me, which is great. Because of her, I’ll be better off than I was before.”

It’s good news, then, for future clients that Lazzara will be a fixture in the family law community for a long time.

“I am invested in my practice and in the lives of my clients. I am enjoying what I do. It works for me,” she says, adding “I couldn’t ask for anything more.”

Elisabeth and her husband live in Inverness and enjoy spending their free time with their children and grandchildren. ■