

BLS LawNotes

THE MAGAZINE OF BROOKLYN LAW SCHOOL | SPRING 2011

Harriet Cohen '74: *The Marriage Broker*



It's a Tuesday in early March and Harriet Cohen '74, one of New York City's most revered matrimonial lawyers, is gazing out her window. Actually, it's more than a window. It's a wall of glass that wraps her corner office at Seven Times Square in morning light. From her bird's perch, she is afforded one of the most coveted views of the City. Central Park and Times Square frame the view to the North, the Hudson River opens up the West, and directly below, several window cleaners hang tethered to the 38th floor by a clamp and a long, twisted muscle of rope. "Oh dear!" she gasps. "I thought my work was hard!"

While Cohen is not out on a literal ledge dangling stories above Times Square, in many instances over her three-decade career, she has rescued clients at the proverbial end of their rope. Known for her skill as a compassionate yet steely negotiator, Cohen has a high-profile client list — including the likes of Andrew Cuomo, Laurence Fishburne, Linda Lavin, and Ronald Perleman's ex, Patricia Duff — that is a testament to her experience and reputation.

Cohen has been called a "formidable divorce force" by the *New York Observer*, and has been regularly named to the NY Metro Super Lawyers list in the field of Family Law. Outside the courtroom, she has been called upon by the Governor to serve on the Child Support Commission of the State of New York and by the Mayor to serve on the Foster Care Commission. A regular contributor to the *New York Law Journal*, she is the author of the book, *The Divorce Book for Men and Women: A Step-by-Step Guide to Earning your Freedom Without Losing Everything Else* (Avon 1994).

But Cohen is not only a mediator of others' marital splits. She was 40 years old and heading into her second-year exams at Brooklyn Law School when her husband of 21 years walked out. "I had four daughters at home, and he just left," she recalled. The painful divorce, which she personally handled when she graduated from BLS, was among the factors that led her to devote her career to the practice of family and matrimonial law.

Cohen, who grew up in Providence, Rhode Island, is the eldest daughter of four children born to Eastern European immigrants. Her father made Hula Hoops while her mother stayed home with the kids and made a point of imbuing them with a sense that anything was possible, especially with an education. Cohen excelled academically and skipped grades in grade school and high school, enrolling in college at Barnard at the age of 16 and graduating at 19 with a degree in classics.

One week after graduation, she married her high school sweetheart. By the time she turned 30, she had four children, a Masters Degree in Latin from Bryn Mawr, and was working as a math teacher at a Brooklyn junior high school. But she had a gnawing desire to do more. "When I was home with my children I became active with the League of Women Voters and it seemed to me that we were powerless. I thought, I have got to do something that gives me some credibility. So I went to law school."

Mentored by professors such as I. Leo Glasser, Cohen flourished at Brooklyn Law School, and found support from a group of women with whom she served on the *Brooklyn Law Review*: the late Joan Koven, Helen Neuborne, and Gail Alpern (now Schneider). "We had a study group, and we were such brainiacs," she said. "I remember our lunches at this greasy spoon around the corner where we never talked about anything other than the law."

Cohen graduated at the top of her class in 1974, and she started out as a generalist, but moved on to focus on matrimonial matters. "I was advised to stay away from matrimonial law because it was considered "women's work," but I found myself drawn to it. It was helpful to have lived through a complicated matrimonial situation myself, but I really just loved the field. You are constantly learning, and no case is the same as the one before."

Cohen joined the Phillips Nizer firm, where she was mentored by Louis Nizer, considered one of the most outstanding trial lawyers of the twentieth century. She went on to run the matrimonial and family law practices of several prominent Manhattan law firms before starting a firm of her own, Cohen Hennessey Bienstock & Rabin, in 1994. In early 2011, she dissolved her previous firm, moving 13 employees, including seven lawyers over to Seven Times Square to form Cohen Rabin Stine Schumann LLP.

For all of her expertise in matters of divorce, Cohen has not soured on the idea of a good marriage. "It is very complicated, and it takes a lot of luck and a lot of hard work. But I still believe in marriage for everyone," she said, pointing to the framed photograph of her late second husband, Arthur Feinberg, a medical doctor, with whom she spent 32 blissfully happy years. "He proposed after a nine-year courtship. He was the love of my life." □