

# JMHS ALUMNI NEWS

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### *Harriet Newman Cohen '49: From Latin to Family Law*

*By Judith Naomi Ophir Fish '64*



Inspired by the classics and Mr. Sol Seinfeld's Latin class, Harriet Newman (Cohen) knew she wanted to be a Latin professor. "I was in a big hurry," she says, reminiscing about her school years. In January 1949, at age 16, she graduated from Madison and began commuting to Barnard College, where she majored in Latin. Back in Brooklyn after classes, she tutored Mr.

Seinfeld's weaker language students. At 19, Harriet married her Madison sweetheart, **Philip M. Cohen '48**, and continued her studies at Bryn Mawr, where she earned her Masters in Latin.

Then came the babies, four girls, and fulltime motherhood. For a time in the late '60s-early '70s, Harriet taught math at George Gershwin J.H. in Brooklyn. But caught up by the women's liberation movement, she set her sights on law school. As she explains it, "I wanted to be taken seriously and make a difference."

At Brooklyn Law, she was part of a group of bright, mature women "returnees." Surrounded "by mostly very young men, we made a big change in the classroom," says Harriet, who quickly became an editor of her school's law review. But the road was not smooth. Harriet was 40 years old when her husband suddenly left her and their daughters. Unprepared for the breakup, she focused on her studies and raising her girls, and received her J.D. in 1974.

"Women were very desirable then," she says, "and I received multiple job offers." A generalist at first, she found her niche in family law and represented herself in her own divorce. She is now a founding partner of Cohen Rabin Stine Schumann LLP, a matrimonial and

family law firm in the Times Square area, and is rated one of the Top 50 female lawyers in the NY Metro Super Lawyers listings. Her high-profile clients include Gov. Andrew Cuomo, actors Laurence Fishburne and Linda Lavin, Indiana Pacers basketball star Paul George, and the former wives of radio personality Howard Stern and film producers Bob and Harvey Weinstein.

Known as a tough advocate who has successfully argued cases in the state Court of Appeals, Harriet battles for her clients' rights, identifying with their pain and needs but helping them set realistic goals. A divorce lawyer, in her words, is "the most intimate person in the life of a client who is in extremis," and she notes how "emotionally and intellectually challenging it is to be in this field."

Reflecting on her background in academia, Harriet says she has maintained a scholarly interest in the development of matrimonial law and spousal rights. A fighter for divorce law reform, she publishes analyses of the law and writes an annual article for the *New York Law Journal's* matrimonial section. This year's article is in opposition to a bill passed by the NYS legislature that would change the spousal maintenance provisions of current divorce law. She is also the author of *The Divorce Book for Men and Women: A Step-by-Step Guide to Gaining Your Freedom Without Losing Everything Else*. Since she began her career, she points out, there have been enormous changes in family law. No-fault divorce, equitable distribution of marital property, prenuptial agreements, marriage equality, have complicated divorce settlements. "Joint custody in New York is now very common and fathers have a very active role," she says.

Harriet's own experience proves that there's plenty of life after divorce: a stellar career; a second marriage of 22 years to the late physician Arthur Feinberg; and four successful daughters, two of whom have followed her into law, the oldest a partner in her firm. Then there are grandchildren, in whose accomplishments she revels, and friends she's known since her high school days – as well as new Madison friends, like Justice **Lewis Bart Stone '54**, a fellow member of The Lotos Club, where she chairs a committee.

"Madison gave me a good foundation for what I have achieved in the rest of my life," Harriet says, and then sums up, "Life is good."

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