

MEIGHAN HARMON

Keeping Divorces Civil

by Paul Dailing



Don't talk to Meighan Harmon about *War of the Roses*.

Harmon, senior divorce and family law partner at **Schiller, DuCanto & Fleck LLP**, calls the 1989 black comedy about a wealthy couple's bitter breakup a purveyor of "the biggest misconception about divorce."

Divorces are always brutal battles, right? Divorces always mean petty jabs and courtroom disputes, right?

Wrong, Harmon says. She sees divorce as two people leaving a bad situation, hopefully both keeping their heads held high.

"The process of watching someone sort of blossom (as they) extricate themselves from a negative environment or a bad relationship... It's pretty remarkable," says Harmon, 40. "I'm not suggesting that divorce is a panacea for people's problems, but oftentimes the process—when done right and approached with the right attitude—it can be transformative."

That attitude involves fostering mutual respect between the soon-to-be exes. Especially when children are involved, divorces often involve people who will be in each others' lives forever—just not as husband and wife.

"Just because people are getting a divorce doesn't mean people don't have an appreciation or respect for the relationship they had," says Harmon, who is also current

president of the Illinois chapter of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers.

Her clients agree and praise Harmon for feeling that way.

"She was focused on what was in the family's best interest," former client Emilia DeMenco says. "Even though the marriage is being dissolved, because there is a child, there is still a family here."

Harmon's clients fall in the high and ultra-high net worth categories. Her clients are usually heavily invested with broad and diversified portfolios, so dividing assets isn't a simple matter of who gets the house and who gets the car.

There are, of course, attorneys who see a wealthy client getting a divorce as an opportunity—one to be stretched out for as long as possible.

This offends Harmon as a person but also confuses her as a lawyer. Beyond the moral implications of dragging out the breakup of a marriage, it's also just bad business.

"Unhappy clients who paid you a fortune to fight about things that shouldn't have been fought about don't make the best referral clients," Harmon says with a laugh.

Later, she turns serious about keeping these civil cases civil.

"I never want a client to have any regrets in

a divorce process," she says. "I don't want them to regret the way they behaved in a divorce process."

The Fighting Irish

Meighan Harmon was born Meighan Templin at Hill Air Force Base in Ogden, Utah, nine-and-a-half months after her father returned from Vietnam. She's the middle of three daughters. A brother died as an infant.

Harmon was raised with a value system many Irish-Americans know well: a trifection of family, fighting for what's right, and Notre Dame football. That upbringing, particularly the "fighting" part, has transferred to her practice at times.

"I think a lot of my colleagues can tell you they've seen the Irish in me," Harmon says, laughing.

Her childhood reads like a travelogue: Japan, Hawaii, Florida, bases throughout Asia, bases up and down the eastern seaboard, Washington, D.C., while her father worked at the Pentagon, and so on.

"I grew up on fighter plane bases all over the world," she says.

Constantly moving taught Harmon how to make friends quickly.

"It's true of most military kids, you learn to be outgoing," she says. "You don't really have a choice. I think that's an asset that carries over into the professional world."

College meant the female-only Sweet Briar College in Virginia. Because of that experience, Harmon is still a huge proponent of single-sex education. She and her husband, Frank, 41, send their daughter Lily, 7, to a private Catholic school with single-sex classrooms.

"I think that is a great environment for girls and young women to learn," Harmon says. "I believe men and women learn differently. I believe the culture of an all-women classroom is a better environment for girls to learn and find their voice."

For Harmon, finding her voice meant transferring to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for her junior and senior years. In part, the transfer was so she could participate in a more traditional college experience, but she also received a scholarship. Her plan was to become a history and political science teacher.

“When I began student teaching during my junior year of college, while I liked teaching, I liked being in the classroom, I found the school environment very unrewarding,” she says.

After graduation, she took the LSAT and got into her “dream school.” Notre Dame, of course.

She accomplished all this despite being mildly dyslexic.

“I’ve learned to adapt to it,” she says. “It’s something that’s been a big part of my academic development over the years.”

The summer after her first year, she volunteered at a San Antonio, Texas, legal aid clinic run by a brother of the Holy Cross. She saw people trying to get out of bad marriages, dealing with terrible, confining situations. When she returned to Notre Dame, she started working toward a career in family law.

It’s a decision she has never regretted.

“I think that we tend to sort of underestimate the stress, both emotional and physical stress, that being in an unhappy relationship has on people’s lives. You can see physical changes in them oftentimes as the veil of anxiety and depression that comes with the breakdown of the relationship...starts to lift,” she says. “I remember one client telling me that through the divorce process she had started to feel young again and hadn’t felt youthful in 15 years.”

Force and Poise

Harmon had made it to her dream school. Now she had to make it into her dream field—family law.

She found out she had a job two days before graduation. That’s a nail-biter for a student at prestigious Notre Dame.

“A lot of people from Notre Dame get hired at the big firms, so many people started their third year knowing they have jobs,” Harmon says.

Harmon shouldn’t have been worried, says Rosaire Nottage, a partner at Nottage and Ward LLP, Harmon’s first firm out of law school.

“She was one of the best candidates we ever had,” Nottage says. “We were really very impressed not only with her credentials but with her.”

Nottage—whom Harmon describes as a friend, mentor and sometimes opponent—says Harmon specifically sought a firm that specialized in divorce.

“Prior to that, I don’t think that many people picked domestic relations as a field they want to go into,” Nottage says.

The young attorney impressed both bosses and clients, Nottage says. She recalls divorcing couples in their 50s completely comfortable letting 20-something Harmon handle their affairs.

“She was great at brainstorming. I would

never expect that out of somebody just out of law school,” Nottage says.

Although Nottage says Harmon can be a tough, forceful advocate, she also praises her former employee’s poise and grace. Harmon, Nottage says, comes off equally as a charming, personable woman and a resourceful, formidable attorney.

“She’s a really, really outstanding person. She just has a nice balance of professionalism and intelligence and her humanity really shows through,” Nottage says.

That comes across to lawyers Harmon has faced off against, lawyers she’s worked with, and those lawyers who fall in both categories.

which also focuses on family law, is a source of professional pride for Harmon.

“One of the things I’m probably most proud of and most focused on in my current professional life is that we’re one of the largest and the oldest family law firms in the country,” Harmon says.

More than Litigation and Mediation

Emilia DeMenco, whom Harmon represented through a length divorce litigation and appeal, says Harmon’s “fairness and ethics” helped her get through the tough time.

“The first thing she brought to the table was perspective,” DeMenco says. “When you’re in it,



Harmon at the Eiffel Tower with daughter Lily Rose Harmon and husband, Frank.

“She is one of the most well-liked lawyers in the community,” says Karen Pinkert-Lieb, another senior partner at Schiller, DuCanto & Fleck LLP.

Harmon and Pinkert-Lieb met while they were associates at different firms working opposite sides of a divorce case.

“She is as comfortable in a negotiation as she is in a courtroom as she is in a collaborative setting,” Pinkert-Lieb says. “She puts a lot of importance on being a better lawyer. She doesn’t sit on her laurels.”

Pinkert-Lieb was glad to see her one-time foe become an ally when Harmon joined Schiller, DuCanto & Fleck LLP in 2001. It was the right decision for Harmon, too.

“I saw it as an opportunity to expand my group of mentors and to work with some of the best family law attorneys in the country,” Harmon says of leaving her old firm for a new one. “It was a difficult decision, but I feel very fortunate to have had both opportunities and both have been really integral to my professional development.”

Working at Schiller, DuCanto & Fleck LLP,

it’s very difficult to see beyond the momentary crisis because it’s such an emotional issue.”

Harmon understands how painful divorce can be for everyone in the family, DeMenco says.

“She always asked how my son was doing,” DeMenco says. “She always asked how he was doing at school and how he was adjusting.”

Divorce lawyers have to be very sensitive to what the couple and their family are going through, Harmon says.

“For a lot of people, it is a very painful process, particularly at the beginning,” she says. “Over time, once they’ve started healing from the pain of divorce, it can be a very empowering process, a very liberating process.”

While some laymen might think divorces either get worked out in mediation or litigated in a courtroom, Harmon has also been working in collaborative divorces over the last three to five years.

“We have more clients asking about it as an option,” she says.

In collaborative law, the husband and wife agree to cooperate in working out the terms of their divorce, rather than have their attorneys

battle it out in a courtroom or over a negotiation table. They sign an agreement that the fight won't go to a courtroom as long as talks are still going on.

The attorneys cannot represent either client if talks break down. This removes the motivation for those lawyers who stretch out divorce cases.

It's negotiation without the threat of litigation.

"In today's day and age, divorce practitioners have to be well-rounded. You don't know necessarily know what a client needs are until they walk in the door," Harmon says.

In determining the route the divorce should take, Harmon first sits down with her clients and finds out what they want to get out of it. Then she finds the best way to meet her clients' wishes.

"Sometimes, that is creative and problem solving and conciliatory, and sometimes that's someone who's tough and standing their ground in an appropriate manner," she says.

Harmon found at Schiller, DuCanto & Fleck LLP a group of attorneys like her who don't see a one-size-fits-all solution for every divorce case. Particularly with the high and ultra-high net worth clients Harmon represents, dividing complicated finances in differing types of divorce cases requires looking at the whole situation.

"I take and I think a lot of my partners take more of a holistic approach trying to help people through this process," she says.

Whatever the clients' goals, the best route to get there always involves knowing the case inside and out—what finances there are to be divided, what the reasons are for the split, what family and social concerns need to be accommodated and, if needed, who did what to whom.

"My number one thing that I think typifies my style is I'm always very prepared," Harmon says. "I think that gives me confidence; I think that gives my client confidence."

"A Jealous Profession"

Harmon has been married for nine years, a marriage she feels is strengthened by her divorce work.

"You marry for better or worse, for good times or bad, and being a divorce lawyer can tell you what 'bad' really means," she says.

She says forgiveness is key to a strong union.

"I have probably more perspective than maybe the average person does that we all make mistakes and not all mistakes are fatal," she says. "That's been important in my personal and professional life."

Both spouses have high-powered, high-pressure careers: Meighan in law, Frank in

financial sales.

Yet, unlike with some couples she's seen, she's not expected to do more than her share of the housework just because she's the woman.

"I happen to have a very engaged and involved husband who is a very active co-parent. I have a lot of female colleagues who don't have that," Harmon says. "There are a lot of moms who work full-time and also do the vast majority of housekeeping and parenting in their households."

These extra domestic expectations can make it harder for women to handle home and a career in what Nottage calls "a jealous profession," the demanding field of law.

"When a woman says, 'I have to take time off because of my kid,' that immediately slaps you on the mommy track," Nottage says.

Nottage, who graduated law school in 1976, describes herself as in the "first wave" of women entering the high-powered field. She says Harmon represents a newer era, one where a woman can show her own personality without being underestimated for it.

"We had to be bigger, taller, tougher, meaner—or at least we thought we did," Nottage says, chuckling.

Despite the social sea changes since the 1970s, women still face many of those same problems today, Harmon says.

"Women still struggle to find a balance in their personal and professional lives," Harmon says. "There's no way around the fact that having children has a profound affect on your career. It just does."

Harmon is proud to be with a firm that reflects the changing role of women in law. The last four people to be named senior partners at Schiller DuCanto & Fleck LLP are all women.

"Of the four of us women who have become senior partners, all of us have children," Harmon says. "And if I do say so myself, I think all of us are really good role models for young women in our profession. I'm really, really proud of that." ■