

Tanya Stanish

Family Law Practitioner Wins With Compassion

by Dustin J. Seibert

Getting a divorce after 30 years of marriage can be a trying experience for even the most stalwart individuals. Such was the case for Michelle, who was represented in her divorce by Tanya J. Stanish, senior partner with **Schiller DuCanto & Fleck LLP**.

The high net worth divorce between Michelle (who prefers not to use her last name) and her husband, a heart surgeon, took four years. After a number of unsuccessful attempts to negotiate, courtroom proceedings ensued.

“One request I made of Tanya was to take the high road,” Michelle says. “There wasn’t a lot of animosity, and it was not a situation where I was looking to take my ex-husband to the cleaners.”

She says Stanish kept the proceedings relatively bloodless while also preventing her client from “doing something stupid,” or accepting an offer Stanish didn’t believe she deserved, just to end an emotionally and financially trying process.

“It has to be a challenge when you don’t want someone to do anything adversarial and the process by nature is adversarial, but Tanya did just that,” Michelle says. “She definitely looked out for my best interests, and the way I wanted her to do it.”

Stanish became one of Chicago’s most trusted divorce lawyers not just by aiming for the bottom line in the courtroom, but also by approaching every case with compassion that respects the sensitive nature of the process.

Her compassion is not forced. She is intimately interested in seeing her clients come out on the other end of the divorce process better than they were when they were going through it.

“It’s about being tough when they need someone to be tough, being kind when they need someone to be kind, and letting them know when they have to accept what’s fair and to push through,” she says. “When your marriage is the only world you know, it’s important to understand that something better exists and you just need to see it for yourself.”

Engaging an Analytical Mind

Stanish was born and raised in Hammond, Ind., the youngest of four to a mother who was a kindergarten schoolteacher and a



father who she calls a “jack of many trades.” Her parents divorced when she was 10.

Stanish considered following in her mother’s career footsteps. Her mother urged another direction.

“Mom told me not to become a teacher because I wouldn’t make enough money,” she says. “She pretty much supported four kids on a teacher’s salary. We didn’t grow up very wealthy, and she wanted something better economically for us.”

Though Stanish had no particular career aspirations as a child, she was always good at math, which motivated her to major in economics at DePauw University in Indiana. During her senior year, she completed a nine-month internship with Bank One in Indianapolis. The constant flood of loans and documents and the number crunching permanently ruled out a banking career.

“It seemed to be the right thing to do given my strength in math, but I hated it. It was so boring and dry,” she says. “I hit the panic button and realized I couldn’t do this for the rest of my life.”

“I figured, ‘What’s the point? Who am I helping here really?’ It didn’t fulfill my needs in terms of wanting to do something that made a difference. Plus, I needed interaction with people that was missing from the internship.”

Stanish took the LSAT after a fellow intern applying to law school provided the motivation. When Stanish requested recommendation letters for law school applications, one of her professors asked why she wanted to jump fields.

“I wasn’t sure exactly what that meant at the time, but I knew I wanted to help people,” she says. “I thought law school might be a good route for me, since I figured that much out.”

It took a marital dissolution course during her second year at DePaul University College of Law for Stanish to get an idea about what type of law she wanted to practice.

“I loved it,” she says. “It was fascinating to me, and it really clicked.”

Near the end of that course, Judge Richard S. Kelly (now deceased) of the Cook County Domestic Relations Division presented a lecture to her class. It culminated with Judge Kelly recommending that anyone interested in working with him provide a resume.

Stanish was so fascinated by the field at that point that she sent the resume, was called in for an interview that summer, and was offered a nine-month externship during her third year of law school. The externship



From left: son Jake, 7, and daughter Zemme, 5.

allowed her the opportunity to sit in the courtroom and observe court proceedings and pretrial conferences. The judge allowed Stanish to help write his opinions. He also solicited her feedback on his cases.

“It was absolutely enjoyable and eye-opening because it demonstrated to me what it looked like to be a divorce lawyer,” she says. It also showed me the behind-the-scenes of what judges were thinking and what they said when lawyers weren’t present, and what the clerks thought about the lawyers.”

“From then on, it was a no-brainer. I knew it was exactly what I wanted.”

To this day, family law allows Stanish to quench her thirst for two important things she wanted to apply to any career she had.

“It’s the combination of helping someone through a difficult process, making a difference, and stoking my analytical mind with the division of estates, complicated assets and big dollars,” she says.

Tough Job Market Awaits

Despite graduating law school with honors in the top 10 percent of her class, Stanish had a very hard time finding a job in the tough legal market of 1995. After six months of searching, she wound up with Lois Kulinsky & Associates, then a small solo practitioner in Wheeling, where she

primarily did divorce work.

Tight finances and law school loans prevented her from being able to move near Wheeling, so she stayed home with her mother in Hammond and spent three hours a day commuting.

“It was a good first job in that it taught me the basics of being a hands-on divorce lawyer,” she says. “But I left when I felt that I’d outgrown more simplified divorces. The challenge wasn’t there anymore.”

After 1½ years, Stanish switched to another solo practitioner, the Law Offices of Debra DiMaggio, in Chicago. Nine months in, she was approached by a headhunter interested in recruiting her to work for a small family law practice at Jenner & Block.

Stanish was reticent to move because she was happy with DiMaggio and had only been there for nine months, but the headhunter talked her into submitting her resume for the position. Despite Jenner & Block’s pristine reputation, she wasn’t sure if she should make the move.

“I spoke with Judge Kelly about it, and he said, ‘Tanya, you can’t do any better,’” she says. “That’s the premier family law department. You’ll be representing wealthy clients, and you’ll have a whole new level

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of sophistication. So I figured it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up.

"I was nervous because I knew expectations would be very high, it was a big move, and I'd heard scary things about big firms. But I knew it was a chance for growth in my career and to do a lot of high-powered divorces."

Stanish's fears wound up being unfounded. She "fell into the groove" at Jenner, where she stayed under family law practice chair James Feldman for 10 years doing high net worth divorces ("He was a great mentor to me," she says). She became a partner after five years.

"By nature, I was always a hard worker. Even at the two smaller firms, I was working a lot," she says. "Though a large firm like Jenner puts a lot of demands on you, I was able to meet them because I already had the work ethic they expected of me."

Feldman says he sensed something special about Stanish immediately.

"Right from the start, Tanya showed the qualities that characterized her 10 successful years at Jenner, as a bold, creative and tireless advocate for her clients," Feldman says. "I could always count on Tanya to represent clients with the utmost skill and integrity."

Next Career Jump: Schiller

When Stanish discovered Jenner & Block had no immediate plans to expand the family law department, she realized her opportunities within the firm would become limited. Thirsty for more and bigger opportunities in family law, she approached Schiller DuCanto & Fleck about her next move.

"I knew if I had to go anywhere, it would be here," she says. "I'd had many cases against SDF, and we worked with the same level of clientele: sophisticated cases, high-level clients."

"Though I had a lot of cases against them, I liked a lot of the lawyers. I found them ethical, hardworking and smart, and I figured I could fit right in."

She came to Schiller in 2008 as an income partner and made senior partner in 2012. She focuses on the high net worth divorces that, from a technical standpoint, aren't necessarily a lot different than the regular divorces she did earlier in her career.

"Sometimes it's just a matter of adding a couple zeros," she says. "With high net worth, there's a certain level of assets involved, closely held companies, incentive packages and other nuances. They both deal with lots of emotions and personal custody issues that have nothing to do with dollars."

Jim Godbout, partner at accounting firm Sikich LLP, has served as a financial expert in many of Stanish's cases over the past 10 years. Godbout says Stanish stands out above her peers in her ability to focus on each individual case instead of approaching them all with a one-size-fits-all mentality.

"She has the ability to take a step back, fully understand the financial picture, make reasonable assumptions about the case, and reach a financial settlement without going through a tremendous amount of litigation and a bunch of unnecessary costs for her client and everyone else involved," he says.

Give and Take of Law and Family

Stanish is the adoptive mother of son Jake, 7, and daughter Zemme, 5, whom she named after a client's daughter. As of this year, both are in school, which has changed what is required of Stanish: homework, school conferences and extra-curricular events.

Stanish says managing both worlds is absolutely achievable.

"You can have a very successful career and you can be a very good mom," she says. "I challenge any person who says otherwise. But it's a give and take, and I'm always juggling."

"I chose to be a single mom, and I would never choose anything differently. Being a working mom and quasi-dad at the same time is tough, but it can also be the best thing ever."

Though she has an *au pair* to help her out, Stanish admits it's a constant — but welcome — task to be a single parent and a high-powered divorce lawyer.

"Some days are a juggle, some days are smooth," she says. "But where I am in my career right now, I can do a lot of the scheduling that allows me to be a mom and a partner in a major law firm."

Barring the infrequent early court date that can't be rescheduled, she drops her kids off at school every morning. Fortunately, she says, the profession has evolved to allow for more flexibility for working parents.

"If a judge requests to start a trial at 9 a.m., I will speak up and say I would prefer we start at 9:30 because I drop my kids off at 8:30," she says.

"I don't mind saying that, and 99 percent of the time the judge accommodates that request. Every now and again there are issues with older lawyers and that old-school male attitude, but it's getting better."

Importance of the Extra Mile

Though Stanish works with a mentoring group at Schiller that meets once a month to discuss cases and other issues, she tries to mentor many of the firm's junior attorneys informally whenever possible.

One of her goals is to convince students to market themselves to the best of their ability.

"Go meet your law school classmates, go to cocktail parties...you never know who you'll end up meeting and who can be your referral source," she says.

"You can't be afraid to be social. That's how you'll find the people who will remember you five, 10, 15 years down the line, not because of the work you do for them, but because you stuck out at a party and introduced yourself as a divorce lawyer."

Stanish wrote an opinion column for the *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin* on Oct. 1, 2014. It discusses, among other things, how domestic violence issues occur even in relationships in the higher tax brackets, as evidenced by the incident involving Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice and his wife Janay.

After nearly two decades of practicing in family law, the cases where women in abusive marriages come to her frightened and looking for help resonate with her the most.

"You work to get them through the process — some involve orders of protection, some don't," she says.

"At the end of the case, a year or two later, they look at you and go 'Wow, you really helped me through something so difficult, I learned what a bad situation I was in and didn't realize it until I was on my own.' They're thankful that you were strong for them."

It's those types of cases that bring out the staunch "litigator" in Stanish, though she admits she's always been a bit uncomfortable with the term.

"People wanted to call me one, even though I didn't want to call myself one," she says. "Sometimes you say 'litigator' and people think negatively, but I'm tough. This is my forte, and I do a great job in the courtroom."

"I would love to settle a case every day of the week if possible, but sometimes cases require the courtroom because people are too far apart and you need the judge to call it. At the end of the day, I want a fair outcome for my client, and I'm not afraid to be tough in order to get it."

If Stanish is not willing to refer to herself as a litigator, other people certainly will.

"Some lawyers are good at getting settlements but can't try a case," Godbout says. "Some are no good at settlements because they want to litigate everything. Tanya's really good at both."

"And when she's in the courtroom, she becomes a tiger." ■