

DORIS McMORROW

A Dancer in Divorce Law

by Robert Loerzel

Before she began practicing as a divorce lawyer, Doris Schumacher McMorrow was a ballet teacher. And before that, she was a corporate lawyer.

That's not exactly a typical career path in the legal profession. How many lawyers can say they spent 10 years running a dance school?

McMorrow says that experience prepared her well for the work she does today as a partner at **Davis Friedman**, a Chicago firm specializing in family law.

"During that time when I was teaching ballet,

that I could remember all of these kids," she says. "If you can't remember the name of each child you're teaching, that's kind of sad in my opinion, but I guess it happens. People run a factory. But I always had a relationship with each child."

But McMorrow was itching to begin practicing law again. The question was: What sort of law? She'd always been interested in psychology. McMorrow's experiences talking with ballet students and their parents got her thinking about family law. "I thought, 'How

Now that she's been at the firm for 11 years, McMorrow has that same sort of reputation for integrity.

"I respect Doris as someone who is a problem solver, who resolves cases in a professional and cooperative manner," says Chicago divorce lawyer Leon Finkel, a co-managing partner at Berger Schatz, who has been on the opposing side in several divorces. "She tries to settle cases in a pragmatic way."

Karen Pinkert-Lieb, a senior partner with Schiller DuCanto & Fleck LLP who recently



I was always talking to parents," McMorrow says. "If there was some kind of a family problem, they would call me up and tell me that their daughter might be nervous. All of a sudden, I'm giving advice. I started thinking, 'Well, I'm pretty good at this. I understand kids.'"

McMorrow left her job in corporate law in 1983, when she had her first child. She'd been a lawyer for six years by that time. But she'd been a dancer for almost all of her life, beginning ballet classes as a 5-year-old girl in Tulsa, Okla.

McMorrow used her time away from the legal field to pursue her passion for dance. She began teaching ballet near her home in north suburban Winnetka, starting out with 20 students. Her school, known as Dance Inc., grew to 135 students a decade later.

"Everybody couldn't believe my memory—

could I combine my interest in psychology and the law?" she says.

When McMorrow applied for a position at a firm specializing in divorce law, a partner who interviewed her asked: "Now, why would we hire you? You haven't practiced law for 10 years. Can you handle stress?"

McMorrow responded: "Have you ever put 135 kids onstage for a recital?"

McMorrow got hired. And after practicing divorce law for six years at another firm, she joined Davis Friedman in 1999, becoming a partner not long after that.

"I had always admired the way lawyers at Davis Friedman practiced," McMorrow says. "They're highly regarded for their integrity and their civility in court. ...That's what attracted me to them."

opposed McMorrow in a divorce, says, "She is a very good advocate on behalf of her clients. She truly leaves no stone unturned—sometimes to the chagrin of her opposing counsel."

Experience Brings Empathy

McMorrow says she draws on her personal experience when she advises clients who are going through a divorce. She got divorced herself, around the time she was returning to practice as a lawyer after her dance-school days.

"My ex-husband and I have taught the children to respect both parents," she says. "Even though people have different ways of parenting, you have to respect the other parent."

James L. Rubens, managing partner at

Davis Friedman, says McMorrow's own experiences with divorce help her relate to her clients.

"She is sensitive," he says. "That does give her a different understanding and insight and empathy for her clients."

McMorrow warns clients against having marathon conversations or arguments with their spouse.

"They'll say, 'I'm going to talk to them again tonight. We're going to meet for three hours,'" McMorrow says. "When you're going through such an emotional conflict, you can't have heavy heart-to-heart conversations for than 45 minutes or an hour a day. Humanly, you can't do it. One of the reasons people get so exhausted and exasperated is they spend too much time fighting or arguing—when they should say, 'OK, let's allow this much time to talk about it.'"

At the beginning of every divorce case McMorrow handles, she tries to give her client a realistic idea of what he or she should expect to receive in a settlement.

"I'm a very strong advocate for my clients, but I'm also a realist in almost every area of my life," she says. "I do not oversell clients when they come into my office. I do not say, 'Oh, I'll be able to get this high percentage of the estate or this much alimony.' I don't ever promise. I give them a range. I give them a healthy perspective the first time they come into meet with me. If they want something that I think is totally not feasible, I will tell them I'm not their lawyer."

McMorrow says this approach makes it easier for the two sides in a divorce case to reach a settlement that everyone can live with. Problems arise when the lawyer for the other spouse makes unrealistic promises.

"When someone asks for the moon, I just keep marching toward trial," McMorrow says. "Usually, that attorney becomes very uncomfortable and says, 'I don't know how I'm going to ever settle this, because they want the moon.' And I say, 'Yeah, you didn't tell them nine months ago that they weren't getting the moon. Now you want me to give you the moon, so we can settle the case. It's just not going to happen.'"

McMorrow says she always tries to steer a divorce case toward an amicable settlement, but she also goes through all of the necessary preparation for a trial. "Usually, when someone's been unreasonable, just before trial is when you can make a settlement," she says.

"She takes aggressive stances when they are called for, but she doesn't take an overly aggressive stance," Rubens says. "She's not unrealistic. It's very important for the client to know what's doable and what isn't doable."

"She's very calm and rational," says one of

McMorrow's clients. "That was the tone she set from the beginning."

The woman, who reached a divorce settlement with her husband earlier this year, agreed to be interviewed on the condition of anonymity. She says McMorrow always gave her a clear idea about the sort of settlement that was likely. Meanwhile, according to the woman, her ex-husband and his attorney were often combative.

"It didn't rattle her (McMorrow) at all," the client says. "She just stuck to her guns."

The divorce ended with results similar to what McMorrow had predicted.

"She was supportive emotionally," the woman says. "When things got ugly, she was willing to step up to the plate and deal with things."

What's Best for Children

Realistic expectations are important not just when it comes to questions of money and property—they're also the key to working out child custody and visitation, McMorrow says.

Sometimes, a client will say, "I don't want my spouse to see the children any more than once a week." McMorrow tells these clients that's not realistic. She says it's also not healthy for the children (unless it's a situation where a parent is endangering the children).

"I'm going to say, 'I don't think that's the best thing for your kids, and I don't think I can achieve that result for you,'" McMorrow says.

Since McMorrow began practicing as a divorce lawyer in 1993, she has seen some significant changes in how divorced parents share their children.

"When I first began, the standard visitation schedule was for the non-custodial parent to have the children every other weekend," she says. "And that would be for only Friday and Saturday night. And one weeknight for dinner."

But in recent years, it's become common for children to spend an almost equal amount of time with each of the divorced parents.

"Fathers are more involved with their children," McMorrow says. "They change diapers. They take care of their children. And a lot of marriages have two-income earners. Both parents are busy, so they share more of the parenting."

McMorrow says she strives to work out practical, reasonable plans for child custody and visitation.

"I do think that I have an insight into how parents should share time with their children because of my own experience," she says. "I can craft visitation schedules to fit just about any situation, because I've had them before. I've really thought about what would be good

for the children—and hopefully good for my client and the other spouse."

During the economic downturn of the last few years, McMorrow has seen some divorcing couples facing financial troubles.

"Some divorces are lasting longer because they have to stay in the house until it's sold," she says. "They can't afford to have two homes. And that creates a lot more friction."

Stress Reducer

McMorrow prides herself on reducing friction. Finkel says he's seen her do that by cracking a joke.

"She has a terrific sense of humor that helps defuse tense situations," he says.

McMorrow says she often encourages her clients to do things that will get their minds off their problems.

"I tell my clients, 'What are you going to do for fun next week?' You always have to move forward."

McMorrow follows that advice herself. She no longer performs ballet, since experiencing an injury to her feet. But she often goes out tango dancing. She enjoys reading, seeing films and staying current on music, and she collects art. Lately, she's been thinking about taking up acting or improv comedy.

"It can only add to my life," she says. "I'm always thinking: How can I grow?"

Leading a balanced life has been important to McMorrow since she was a child, growing up first in Oklahoma and later in Chicago's northern suburbs. She says she was inspired to achieve by her father, who was a lawyer; an uncle, who was a psychoanalyst; and a grandmother, who was a doctor. McMorrow earned a bachelor's degree in English in 1973 at Vassar College, graduating magna cum laude, and a J.D. in 1977 at Suffolk University, where she was on the law review.

"I grew up in a family where I was expected to have a career," McMorrow says. "I never thought of not having a career."

McMorrow speaks with pride of her children: Peggy, 27, teaches sixth grade in Winnetka, and Jack, 23, is a paralegal at Davis Friedman, who plans to become a lawyer.

And through her work on divorce cases, McMorrow says she hopes she has helped other children make it through tough situations.

"I do love seeing those kids," she says. "What I really enjoy doing is helping some people through a difficult time—and trying to get a future for them, so they're financially and emotionally ready to go into the next stage of life. I do feel that I usher people through it."

"She cares greatly for her clients," Rubens says. "She's very dedicated." ■