

A portrait of Pam Hutul, a woman with long, straight blonde hair, smiling. She is wearing a dark, double-breasted jacket with gold buttons over a red turtleneck. The background is a blurred city street.

## Pam Hutul

## Removing Strife from Divorce, When Possible

by Mike Ramsey

Divorce isn't easy, under the best of circumstances. In the worst of circumstances, it can be devastating. Longtime family law attorney Pamela J. Hutul helps guide her clients through the life-changing and sometimes combative process of ending a marriage.

"People want to do right in their divorce. They want to make the end of their relationship reflect the integrity with which they began it," says Hutul, a partner at **Davis Friedman**, which exclusively handles family law.

"But sometimes they're just too flooded with emotion to act rationally. It's an important job for me to help them get there so they're not making decisions based on just the emotional component. Even when they want revenge, their highest and best self knows it's about doing what's best for them and their family."

Hutul represents wealthy individuals whose businesses and fortunes are potentially at stake and whose time with their children may be greatly altered. To protect her clients, she draws on nearly 40 years of legal experience, an eclectic base of knowledge and — when necessary — a framed mantra that hangs over her desk.

A variation on a verse from Psalm 46 reads: "Be still and know."

### Seizing Opportunity

It was not a foregone conclusion Hutul would practice law, even though her father, Harry P. Hutul, was a personal injury lawyer whom she greatly admired. She spent much of her formative years in Lincoln Park before her family — including her mother, Dolly, a former U.S. Navy journalist — moved to the North Shore.

Pam Hutul graduated from Lake Forest High School and attended Lake Forest College. The range of college classes she took, including French, psychology and philosophy, reflects her lifelong passion for learning. "I'm an education junkie," Hutul says.

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in government and taking a "gap year" to travel, Hutul landed a position at Continental Bank, doing remittances for the trust department. It was a perfectly

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decent job, but she thought she was destined for something more challenging in that early-1970s era.

“I definitely wanted a career. I was at the early part of the feminist movement, where I thought I didn’t want to be a traditional homemaker. I didn’t plan on having children. I needed an identity that was my own,” Hutul says.

She attended John Marshall Law School while working at a law firm that did some divorce work. Around the time she passed the state bar in 1975, Illinois legislators were rewriting the marriage law. When the Illinois Marriage and Dissolution of Marriage Act took effect a couple of years later, Hutul saw an opportunity.

“There was a whole new vocabulary that came from the Uniform Act, and everybody had to retool themselves, even the most experienced divorce lawyers,” she says. “I took a couple of months off, and I studied the Uniform Act.”

Her strategy paid off. “By year three, I had moved into space with other lawyers, had a great office and a great staff, and was able to hire another lawyer. It was fun, intellectually challenging and personally rewarding.”

And so it went until the 1984 birth of her son, Benton Page, caused a deviation in the plan. By the time he was 2, Hutul came to the realization she needed to focus on being a mother.

“I was well-ingrained in my business and loved it, but I couldn’t do both, and I could see I was frustrated in not doing my best at either job,” she says. “My husband — I was married to Ben’s dad then — and I agreed that I would work from home.”

Hutul considers the next eight years a period of semi-retirement, but she kept busy doing advisory work in the domestic relations field and taking graduate courses in religion at Northwestern University. She resumed the full-time practice of family law in 1994. Meanwhile, her son grew up and followed her professional path, graduating from law school in 2008.

The proud mom wanted to work with him, but Hutul’s firm at the time had a policy against hiring family members. She joined him in 2009 at Davis Friedman, where the two work on cases together. She says their collaboration has been hugely successful.

Most grown children might not want to spend so much time with a parent. But Page, 30, has no qualms about it. He is an associate who became a father in 2013.

“We’re close, and it was a great opportunity to work with one of the best,” he says. “From my perspective, I never had any issue with it.

I was excited to do it from day one.”

Among the skills Page says his mother has taught him is how to stay cool when dealing with abrasive personalities.

“She’s taught me to count to 100 before I respond to obnoxious emails, calls, whatever else. There’s a temptation to react with a knee-jerk, but that’s not a good way to go,” Page says.

### **Nuts and Bolts of Divorce Law**

Hutul tries to keep conflict to a minimum, but she says that’s not always possible. While most of her peers are excellent divorce lawyers who have similar goals — albeit for their own clients — other professionals have a different strategy.

“There are some lawyers who are just well-known for their adversarial natures and who love the conflict. It doesn’t unnerve me,” the Chicago resident says. “But I warn my clients of the cost and difficulty of dealing with those personalities. I tell them the higher costs of the litigation will come out of their estate.”

“Sometimes there’s respectful disagreement, and we have to litigate it,” Hutul says. “The best option is to have people who treat each other with respect and deal with the issues.”

Contrary to conventional wisdom, men and women do not automatically gravitate toward a divorce lawyer of the same gender, based on her experience. She has been

hired by an even split of men and women over the years.

Clients tend to come to her based on referrals. Typically, it takes a phone conversation or face-to-face meeting to see if the lawyer and litigant are a good match, she says.

“I tell people, ‘Interview several lawyers,’” Hutul says. “Find the person you really connect to. It’s not a simple relationship. It’s a long-term, intimate relationship. We’re going to have to, sometimes, go deep into things that are painful, deep into things that are complicated.”

That’s a two-way street. “Before being hired, I want the ability to say, ‘You know, I don’t think we’re a good fit,’” she says. “Have I done that? Yes. But once we start, it’s a commitment.”

As part of her job, she occasionally drafts prenuptial agreements. These arrangements may turn some people off. Her take: They make a lot of sense, especially for people who have previously been married.

“It’s really meant to take anxiety out of the relationship, not put it in, although even talking about it makes people anxious,” Hutul says. “Oftentimes people are a little offended, asking, ‘Why are we getting married if we don’t trust each other enough?’ But if you understand the complexities and the protections it can afford to both parties, people accept it.”

She also works on the occasional

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Hutul with son Benton H. Page, a Davis Friedman associate.

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“postnuptial” agreement, when couples are experiencing turbulence in their marriage. They agree to begin dividing assets, in case they enter the worst-case scenario. That reduces some of the sense of insecurity, she says.

Hutul herself has been through divorce. “I was a good divorce lawyer before I got divorced,” she says. “I understand it better, having walked in those moccasins, certainly.”

Hon. Michele Lowrance (Ret.) spent nearly two decades as a judge in the Cook County Circuit Court Domestic Relations Division. She observed Hutul’s work for years before the lawyer represented her.

“She is the epitome of iron-fist/velvet glove, because she really advocates for her client. But she never gets caught up in exacerbating the conflict. She never fuels the fire,” says Lowrance, author of *The Good Karma Divorce: Avoid Litigation, Turn Negative Emotions into Positive Actions, and Get On with the Rest of Your Life*.

“As a matter of fact, she has a very good calming effect, not only on her own clients, but the opposing attorneys,” Lowrance says.

### Wide Range of Pursuits

Hutul, 66, is fit and energetic. She considers herself at the peak of her career. But there’s more to life than work.

She is a doting grandmother to Page’s daughter, Ava. She also has seven stepchildren from her first marriage five from her current marriage to retired businessman William Ross. She’s close with all of them.

“Depends on how you look at it,” Hutul says, when asked about her children. “I have one, eight or 13.”

She’s an avid hiker, golfer and reader. Hutul likes to share books that have made impressions on her. Last year, she gave clients some of her favorites, including Daniel James Brown’s *The Boys in the Boat*, the true story of a group of U.S. underdogs competing in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, and Hampton Sides’ *Blood and Thunder: The Epic Story of Kit Carson and the Conquest of the American West*.

Her interest in learning endures, both for her personal and professional benefit. She attended the Harvard School of Dispute Resolution and Negotiation. Hutul has also studied grief counseling, and she has become interested in neuroscience and its applications in her field. To that end, she recently took a course on how to know if a person is telling the truth.

“I consider it a duty to offer the best to the

people whose lives I influence and help make decisions that affect their futures,” she says.

Hutul’s interests also include philanthropy and health. After her husband’s recovery from prostate cancer, the couple sponsored the William D. and Pamela Hutul Ross Clinic for Sexual Health at North Shore HealthSystem.

Based at Glenbrook Hospital in Glenview, the clinic offers clients an alternative to traditional practitioners who may not have the time or the expertise to delve into and treat a patient’s sexual dysfunction following surgery or because of psychological issues.

“A center like ours — we lay out the pros and cons of every possible treatment for men and women and help them make informed, empowered decisions — is extremely rare,” clinic director Jeffrey Albaugh says.

Albaugh says Hutul and Ross’ support is particularly welcome because human sexuality remains a seldom-discussed topic in mainstream medicine.

“Pam and Bill are amazing people. They’re so generous with not only their money, but with their time and their name,” Albaugh says. “They really stepped out and put themselves out there for the good and health of other people.”

Hutul remains a student of religion and is an admirer of the Dalai Lama. She co-chaired a committee to organize the Tibetan leader’s 2011 visit to the Chicago region. That interfaith effort included fundraising, marketing and producing two events.

“I met him on a previous visit long ago and had been a fan of his for years,” she says. “He has immense presence and such dedication to peace, and then he is also a playful and a happy soul. Needless to say, learning patience while maintaining strength and joy has helped me in my work.”

Although Hutul typically enjoys working with her clients and getting to know them, the relationship sometimes ends when the case is over. The client may not want to recall the challenges associated with the dissolution of their marriage. Others have remained friends with her.

Either is fine, she says.

“The family will continue long after the lawyers are gone,” Hutul says. “The former spouses will have a relationship — hopefully. And it’s just better in life if you can look back on it with a philosophy of accomplishment: Yes, we weren’t able to make it as a marriage, but we treated each other well, we acknowledged our need to start over, and we went on.” ■