

## **Comeback lawyers**

### **New efforts help attorneys on extended leave return to practice**

#### ***Lawyers USA***

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When Norma Silfen stopped practicing law in 1992, the Internet was still in its infancy, postal mail was more popular than e-mail and the BlackBerry hadn't been invented.

Silfen, 46, graduated from Brooklyn Law School in 1988 and practiced for four years before becoming a stay-at-home mom. But as her two children – now 12 and 15 years old – got older, she began thinking about resuming her career.

A separation and a bout with breast cancer (now in remission) jolted her life. But the traumas also gave her the financial and emotional impetus to reclaim her independence and rebuild her career. With her professional skills as out-of-date as big shoulder pads, Silfen decided to update her legal and office skills before looking for a job. She attended a new program at Pace Law School in White Plains, N.Y., designed to help non-practicing attorneys re-enter the workforce.

The first part of Pace's two-semester, New Directions program – launched last year – covered basic legal skills, such as negotiation, legal writing and research. During the second part, local attorneys gave nuts-and-bolts seminars on their practice areas. In the final stage, students served 10-week, unpaid "externships," working for local legal employers.

The students ranged in age from their mid 40s to early 60s. Most, like Silfen, had not practiced in 10 to 20 years. Thirteen students, including one man, graduated from Pace's program last year.

This year, the program has 36 students, including four men.

"It's clearly serving a very powerful need," said Deborah Volberg Pagnotta, director of the New Directions program.

"For me, personally, it was an amazing experience," Silfen said. "The people in the program were all feeling the same kind of insecurity that you experience when you haven't worked in a long time. They covered everything from how to dress for work, to computers, to legal subject areas." During her externship in Westchester County's Surrogate Court, Silfen made connections that led to a job offer with McCarthy Fingar, a 28-lawyer trusts and estates firm in White Plains. She has been working at the firm for two months now as a full-time associate.

Silfen is among a growing legion of lawyers – most of them women – forging the comeback trail. The reasons for their hiatuses vary from child-rearing to taking care of elderly parents to simply opting out of overly demanding practices.

## **Welcome back**

The re-entry efforts of these lawyers are drawing a surprising welcome from the legal profession:

- State bars in Massachusetts and New York have launched "Lawyers in Transition" programs offering advice, information and support to help lawyers who have left the workplace temporarily.
- A pilot project by the ABA's section on business law provides continuing legal education programs and networking opportunities for business attorneys who are temporarily on leave.
- Pace's New Directions program and a similar one at the University of California's Hastings College of the Law help lawyers return to practice.
- A number of large law firms have established open-door policies for lawyers on personal leaves. Skadden, Arps' Sidebar program, for example, allows attorneys to leave the firm for personal reasons for up to three years, with the understanding that they will return at the end of that period. While they're gone, they remain connected by attending firm-sponsored events and CLE programs.

## **Confidence booster**

Deborah Epstein Henry, head of Flex-Time Lawyers, a national work-life balance consulting firm with offices in New York and Philadelphia, said law firms are becoming more open to hiring lawyers with non-traditional career histories.

"What's changed is an understanding that there is tremendous value in this talent pool that has

stepped off the track," she said.

Pagnotta, director of New Directions, said legal employers have contacted her in search of graduates to employ, especially those willing to work part-time or without benefits.

"We're seeing firms that have downsized and are in a position to hire, and are looking for people they feel will be able to hit the ground running, have a strong work ethic and are interested in staying at that place," she said.

But even with more job prospects available, Epstein-Henry said returning lawyers – especially women – worry about how employers will perceive them.

"The number one obstacle I see for women trying to get back in is confidence," she said. "Women are terrified about what to do, how to assess their interests, if they'll fit in, how to get the balance back. That lack of confidence can be a real impediment to them getting back."

Lauren J. Wachtler, a partner at Mitchell Silberberg & Knupp in New York and chair of the New York State Bar Association's Lawyers in Transition committee, agreed: "They worry about, 'What do I have to offer, how am I going to tell them I'm smart when they think I've been being a mommy or doing nothing?'"

New York Lawyers in Transition recently offered five lunch seminars at Wachtler's Manhattan office, covering career comeback issues. About 30 lawyers attended each session.

"They get a chance to network, to learn something," Wachtler said.

The Massachusetts bar, which was the first in the nation to launch a Lawyers in Transition group, plans a major conference for October on re-entry issues.

"It's been profound to me to see how many lawyers out there have been primarily on the parent track and are looking to re-enter the practice, or had a different career path and are now looking to get back into practice," said Denise Squillante, a solo family law practitioner in Fall River, Mass., and chair of Massachusetts' Lawyers in Transition.

For Silfen, the wisdom gained from life during her time not practicing law has helped her adjustment as a new associate.

"The biggest difference between me as an associate when I was younger and me now is that I'm not afraid to assert my opinion," she said. "And I feel my life experience has added a lot to my ability to understand and empathize with clients. I think I really can see the big picture."

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