

Lauren Goodkin Roth

Business Law Background Benefits Divorce Clients

by Lauren P. Duncan

For family law attorney Lauren Goodkin Roth, pursuing a legal career didn't require a lot of debate. Rather, it was a career choice that was seemingly embedded in her from a young age. At least that's what she's been told.

"When she was very young, probably 3, if not a little younger — she was very vocal — she said, 'You know, I'm going to grow up and be a lawyer, just like my dad,'" says Roth's father, Stan Goodkin, a St. Louis-based attorney. "How she came to that, I don't know. But she has always wanted to be a lawyer."

At age 35 today, Roth is a partner at Berger Schatz in Chicago.

The St. Louis native pursued her bachelor's degree at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., where she majored in political science. After finishing her undergraduate education in only three years, she worked one summer at a nonprofit center aimed at doing legal work for abused and neglected children. It was her first taste of working with lawyers.

Roth then chose to attend Emory University School of Law, where for two years she worked on the *Emory Bankruptcy Developments Journal*.

Right out of school, she joined a large St. Louis firm where she worked in general litigation, which was part of her career plan. From there, she says, she knew she'd be able to focus on a particular specialty if she didn't want to stick with general litigation.

"I realized I really did want to do more client-focused work where you connect with clients on a personal level," she says.

That's when she knew she wanted to focus on family law, and she decided she wanted to do it in Chicago.

She went on to work as a commercial litigator for Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP, which is now a part of Dentons, before finding her home at Berger Schatz in 2010.

Berger Schatz, which was established in 1987, practices exclusively in family and matrimonial law and represents clients with high net worth or complex business assets. Over the course of nearly 30 years, it has grown to become one of the premier matrimonial law firms in the country, with 40 attorneys working between its Chicago and Lake Forest offices.



A Natural Fit

In the six years Roth has been at Berger Schatz, she has been able to fine-tune her skills as a family law attorney by working closely with the firm's team.

Since joining the firm, Roth has found herself immersed in working on an array of family law and domestic relations cases, ranging anywhere from marriage dissolution to gestational surrogacy contracts. She's learned many things about family practice, including that it takes extreme caution and care to deal with issues that can be contentious and with clients who face difficult emotional situations.

Noting that her clients oftentimes "are going through probably the most difficult

times in their lives," Roth has learned over the course of time how to navigate the "ever-evolving and changing course" of her clients' complex personal and legal situations.

One of the main challenges in family law cases involves helping clients balance their emotional expectations and their actual legal options.

"You have to strike a balance and explain to people who are extremely emotional what things are going to be relevant in court and focus them in that direction," she says.

While divorce cases are inherently emotional, she says it's critical to remain focused on seeking legal relief on behalf of her clients. A critical part of Roth's job is getting clients themselves to focus on what

they need to get out of their cases.

Sometimes, divorce proceedings end more smoothly if settled out of court. Roth says it's important to be direct with clients about whether they have a shot at any success with what they want to pursue.

"The litigation route is not necessarily the best route," Roth explains.

For example, pursuing a case in court can sometimes be counter-productive for a client's long-term interests. If children are involved, the time required for court proceedings can also have other emotional implications. That's why, Roth says, in many cases "it's really best to try to reach agreements and settle."

Whether it's in or out of the courtroom, Roth typically works with other attorneys at Berger Schatz, all of whom have a common goal: a positive resolution for the client. Some of those attorneys have doubled as mentors and have helped show Roth the ropes of family law.

Berger Schatz Principal Andrew D. Eichner was instrumental in hiring Roth. Eichner, who joined Berger Schatz in 1988, has an extensive background in family law himself and is a fellow of the Illinois chapter of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers.

He says the firm's choice to add Roth to its team in 2010 was a good one because she is a natural fit for the area of family law.

"She is uniquely suited to family law by virtue of her temperament," Eichner explains. "She has wisdom beyond her years in terms of knowing people psychologically, which is a very important aspect of family law, to really understand people more than dollars and cents or beyond the obvious."

Tackling Complexities

Eichner notes that many people liken a divorce attorney to an amateur psychologist, which is a skill he says Roth possesses. She has the combination of intelligence, psychological acuity, toughness, and "not being afraid to mix it up in court" that makes her uniquely positioned to get the best result for her client, he says.

"She has become a very good amateur psychologist in a very short period of time. The depth of her understanding of people is belied by her tender youth," he adds.

Berger Schatz Principal Jason G. Adess works with Roth on many cases. Adess, who is a distinguished divorce attorney, has been with the firm for 20 years.

In the six years Adess and Roth have worked together, he says the two have come to know each other through a collaborative relationship.

"What I think makes Lauren really special as an attorney who is practicing beyond her years is that she is incredibly tenacious, incredibly opinionated, and

she's incredibly creative. Unlike a lot of junior partners who may feel like they need to take their direction from the first chair and sort of execute orders as given, she's really in the trenches, strategizing, coming up with new and winning ideas on the cases that she works on," he says.

"She's really invested in them in a way that I think reflects extraordinarily positively on her as an attorney," Adess says.

Despite his many years at the firm, Adess says he still learns things from Roth. At the same time, he says, she will ask questions or seek outside expertise, which augments her position as a strong attorney.

"It's the best way to be able to practice, with people who aren't just supportive of the cases you work on but really bring much more to the table," Adess says.

Adess agrees with Eichner that practicing family law requires an important level of client understanding and communication in addition to knowing the law, and that is where Roth excels.

"She's incredibly personable, and she has the patience and insight," Adess says. "She clearly brings that touch to the table as well, to understand the emotional and human side of what we do and to help our clients through it. You wouldn't be able to survive in our industry without it."

Besides handling matrimonial cases — divorce, custody, pre- and post-marital agreements — Roth has also worked on non-traditional areas of family law at Berger Schatz. For example, she's handled surrogacy and egg donor agreements, which she says is different in that clients are working to build families. But it is also a new area of law with legal nuances that are relatively undeveloped.

Eichner says Roth is able to handle all aspects of even the most complex cases. He notes that one of the many benefits of working alongside Roth is her ability to quickly earn the trust of clients, a trait that is incredibly important in family law.

In addition to her skills that help her to work closely with clients, Eichner says she is a quick learner who he is confident will go far in her career at Berger Schatz.

"As soon as she joined the firm, in the first trial I had her put on a witness — and she hadn't been at the firm more than a couple of months — because I was confident she could do it," Eichner says.

Adess agrees, stating he expects Roth to be first-chairing her own trials soon. Adess says the two of them recently worked on a challenging case in which one parent sought to move away from the United States with the child against the other parent's wishes.

Noting that international child "removal" cases are not easily resolvable because there is no middle ground, Adess says Roth was

instrumental in helping their client prevail in the trial court. The victory was affirmed by the appellate court. In another trial that was settled recently, Adess says his adversary remarked that he expected Roth to be there by herself because she had "really handled the case," Adess says.

A Family Lawyer's Family

Outside of her work, Roth and her husband, Kirkland & Ellis attorney Martin L. Roth, are busy with their twin sons who are 4.

Roth's father says when he and Roth's mother travel from St. Louis to Chicago to visit the family, he's always impressed at how Roth can manage a household while also handling work.

"She's a real pistol. I'm very proud of her. She's done a great job at being able to juggle all of this stuff, it's incredible, when you've got twins out there trying to put the kibosh on you, boy she knows how to handle them," Stan Goodkin says.

Eichner, Adess and Goodkin each point to Roth's "great sense of humor" and ability to maintain a steady work-life balance as elements that make her an even more impressive attorney.

"I think taking her knowledge not only as a practitioner but also as a parent and to be able to apply it...actually translates to what we do," Adess says.

Eichner emphasizes that while her personal life adds a greater appreciation for her work, it also requires additional balancing, which Roth is able to pull off.

"She is able to juggle being the mother of twins with a career and a husband who is a high-power partner at a large law firm. To layer that difficulty on top of it and to always be prompt and get her work done on time and be responsive to clients is a substantial accomplishment," Eichner says.

Roth's father also recognizes the challenges she faces both in her work and in balancing her personal life, but he thinks she is able to do it in part because she's a quick thinker who is service-oriented and incredibly organized.

"She's very quick on the trigger in being able to look at a very complicated issue and zeroing in on the actual meat of it and analyzing it in a very quick way," Goodkin says.

Goodkin, who works in personal injury, medical malpractice, and product liability, has handled some domestic relations cases. He notes how the area of family law comes with additional challenges of people who have a lot at stake involving what are usually very personal issues. He believes Roth possesses the required skills to deal with such complexities.

"You've got to be able to kind of calm them down and make sure they see you're

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She also explains why she takes each step, and she helps them set realistic expectations.

"On a workers' comp case, you're never going to be wealthy," she says. "You're not going to be rich. It's to compensate you for what you're missing and for the disability you now have."

Rubin says Doan isn't afraid to question his evaluation of a case and give him her honest opinion.

"She's not a 'yes person,'" he says. "She's somebody who wants to have the academic discussion about a case."

Rubin says she is humble and quiet, but he can tell she loves to win.

"When I congratulate her, I get the little smile," he says. "And then I know she got it."

Delivering Incredible Results

From the very beginning, Rubin was "incredibly impressed" by Doan. He says she gets incredible results and that one of her greatest skills is the confidence she instills in clients.

Though Doan is only 31, not even older clients ask him to oversee her work. Clients love her, from younger clients closer to her age to the older clients who can sometimes be wary of having a younger attorney.

"I'm talking about the 50-year-old, tough construction workers," he says. "They think she is great; they think she is prompt responding to them. They sometimes call her first before they even call me."

"For somebody with her level of experience to have that degree of confidence from older clients is a real credit to her," he says.

Doan has been working with Rubin since she was his law clerk. Rubin says she caught on instantly.

"Within one year, we took off the training wheels and she just did it herself," he says. "I was actually blown away that she understood it so easily."

One of Doan's first cases involved a parking lot, something Rubin describes as very technical that requires a lot of supporting evidence and analysis.

"I can't tell you that I was surprised — I knew she would do a great job — but she absolutely won," Rubin says.

Another of her first cases was a statutory permanent total case, something Rubin describes as a really hard case. The client had lost use of one foot and function in the other after getting hit while driving for work.

"It was an awful situation, but I got to go up there and argue for it and be successful on it," Doan says.

Rubin describes Doan's first oral

arguments as great and composed, her work reversing an arbitration decision as amazing, and her research skills as incredible.

"She's very embarrassed when I say this, but I'm going to tell you anyway: I truly believe she must have a photographic memory because she remembers case names, details, stacks information from appellate court cases that is quite amazing," he says. "She has an instant recall of these important cases."

James R. Clune, a partner at Garofalo, Schreiber & Storm who defends employers against workers' compensation claims like those represented by Rubin Law Group, always looks forward to trying cases against Doan.

"She's always prepared," he says. "She knows her cases thoroughly. You don't waste time getting through unnecessary things that should have already been resolved beforehand."

For example, Doan and Rubin Law Group handle medical expenses uniquely. Clune and Doan recently presented about this together at a continuing legal education panel.

"It used to be the primary issue was the amount of disability the worker has sustained," Clune says. "And now it seems the greater cost in cases are the medical expenses and the greater problems are dealing with medical providers who seem to treat more than perhaps they should and seem to charge more than perhaps they should."

In response, Rubin Law Group hires a professional vendor to process those reported medical expenses. Clune and Doan may still debate whether the case is valid, but Clune can trust that the bills Doan presents him are "cut to the bone."

"It's an expense for them, but it's a refreshing experience to come into the negotiation and know we already know what the bills should be," he says.

Doan also often has case law to support her arguments. Clune says that's unusual in workers' compensation because most workers' compensation attorneys deal with such a big volume of cases that it can be hard to devote much time to research.

"It's difficult to have to take the time," Clune says. "But she does."

As Doan sees it, that extra research makes her do the best job possible.

"I go overboard on citing cases sometimes because I think that everything needs to be supported, and I want to give the commission as much information as I can possibly provide," Doan says.

Rubin says he was blown away that she understood niche workers' compensation law so quickly and so easily.

"I'm very fortunate that our paths crossed," Rubin says. "The practice is great." ■

ROTH

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in command and you're not going to let the opposed spouse and his or her attorney take advantage of that," he says.

"You've got to project this feeling with your client that you're in control, and she does that very well."

Roth enjoys the challenges that come with working in family law, which is why she sees herself working at Berger Schatz for a long time.

"Once I got here, I knew I was happy at the firm and that I'd hope to spend my career working here and advance here. I can't imagine practicing anywhere else. This is definitely where I see myself long term," she says.

"I definitely feel lucky in the sense that not only am I in the area of law that makes me the happiest, but I also have close friendships and feel very connected with the people I work with," she says.

In addition to the firm and the people she works with, she's also found that family law suits her well. The most rewarding moment is the conclusion of a case when a client's issues have been resolved.

"It's fulfilling when there's finality and closure to the case. A lot of divorces don't progress quickly, and that's frustrating for everybody: the judge, the clients, the attorneys. When very litigious cases are ultimately closed out on satisfactory terms for people, that is very fulfilling," she says.

At the same time, when a case progresses quickly, no trial is needed, money is saved, and children's futures aren't held in limbo for a long period of time. Roth says it can be rewarding just to see a case wrapped up swiftly and with few major roadblocks.

"When clients are thankful, when they're appreciative, when clients see that we care and that we've tried really hard, whatever the outcome, that's obviously very fulfilling," she says.

Roth's father insists that he's always seen her as a "star," but not just because she's his daughter.

"She's very observant of the needs of her clients, and she's very concerned about making sure that her clients are more than adequately taken care of," Goodkin says. "She spends a lot of time strategizing in her own mind and with her partners as to the proper ways to ensure that the clients get a good result."

Eichner agrees that Roth is an excellent fit in family law and has a bright future as a partner at Berger Schatz.

"Family law is an area of law you either get or you don't get," Eichner says. "She gets it." ■