

GEMMA ALLEN

Need of Mother's Friend Led Her to a Passion

by **Mary Buss**

"Wait, I don't do divorce," was Gemma Allen's first thought when her mother's friend asked Allen to be her divorce lawyer many years ago.

"As much as I love you, no," was what she told the woman. After a few more phone calls from her mother's friend, and then from her mother, Allen took the case.

"What do you do when your mother is calling, right?" asks Allen, now a partner at **Ladden & Allen, Chartered**.

Her mother's friend became Allen's first client out of law school. Allen was lobbying for

all three over the next 15 years or so.

In 2000, Allen and Ronald S. Ladden started Ladden & Allen, Chartered and never looked back.

"I had this theory that I'd have more free time if I had my own firm," says Allen, of her decision. "I'm not sure that's true."

Allen has heard some pretty gruesome stories practicing family law, but she's heard some happy ones, too.

"I can't begin to enumerate how many people have said to me, 'I really did know we shouldn't have gotten married,'" says Allen.

and closer to where she worked during most of the week.

Success stories like these make Allen's case for making pre-marital education a required part of getting married.

In 1997, Allen proposed somewhat revolutionary legislation to the Illinois General Assembly. Allen's proposed bill required three hours of pre-marital education. The bill passed in the state Senate with the help of state Sen. John Cullerton and then-state Sen. Barack Obama.

The bill did not pass in the state House and Allen understands people don't want private issues directed by government. But she considered the proposed bill a "carrot and not a stick," designed to "wake people up."

Big 3: Fighting, Talking, Money

She still believes the issues raised in the proposal are important to a successful relationship. The first hour of proposed pre-marital counseling would have included training in conflict resolution.

"Nobody teaches us how to fight fair," Allen says.

The second hour would have helped participants build communication skills.

"We really do mishear each other," says Allen. "Try to hear without getting super defensive. Mirror it back."

Allen says that the skills and tools that help individuals to be better communicators don't take long to learn, but have the potential to save a relationship.

The third hour of pre-marital education would have taught participants how to discuss financial issues. Allen recognizes the need for a designated moment when a couple can talk about money.

"We need to be more up front about money," says Allen. "Money means such different things to everyone."

Even though her proposal did not become law, Allen regularly translates its goals into action. She saw a need for an open forum among professionals who have a role in divorce proceedings and addressed it.

Once a quarter, lawyers who practice family law, psychologists, financial advisors, and other professionals form a "think tank" that addresses a designated topic related to family law. An expert makes a presentation on the



big utilities and museums in the Illinois General Assembly, working for the Law Offices of Raymond Simon when she took that call.

She has now been practicing for more than 30 years, actively advocating and facilitating innovative continuing education in family law. Allen, so hesitant at the start about family law, now finds it her passion.

"Divorce law is its own kind of law," says Allen. "It's a practice that is ruled by a statute, applied by human beings to very human situations. If you have a feel for people and you don't lose your empathy, it's a very interesting practice."

After her first case, more potential clients were ready to trust Allen as their divorce attorney. Allen soon was running a successful business. Then came the recruiters—from Epton, Mullin and Druth, McDermott Will & Emery and Pretzel & Stouffer. She worked for

One client took it as a sign that the marriage would break up when her wedding dress was torn on the front pew of the church before the ceremony. Another client said she started to take her doubts seriously when she found herself signing a pre-nuptial agreement in the back of the church.

"Sometimes, I feel sad at weddings," Allen says. "Of course, sometimes, I just rejoice."

Allen advocates prenuptial counseling. She cites a couple she knew socially a few years ago who discovered they had more to work out before getting hitched than they had realized.

During Pre-Cana, or pre-marital counseling sessions led by a Catholic priest, the couple discovered they had very different ideas about where they would live once they were married. They resolved the issue, and lived happily, close to where he worked on the weekends

topic, while the attendees ask questions and share experiences.

Since Allen approaches divorce as an event that affects a family globally, Allen's think tanks invite a rich discussion of current topics in family law.

Recently, financial evaluation and managing assets linked to the changing housing market have been such hot topics. Families are faced with questions like "Who gets the house?" or "Can we keep the house?"

"These are painful decisions for which you need a level of expertise which, candidly, we didn't need before," says Allen.

Another discussion centering on how children cope with divorce featured Suzy Yehl Marta, founder of Rainbows for All Children, as the keynote speaker.

Rainbows for All Children is a local, non-profit organization committed to the mental health and well being of all children. It provides grief counseling to children whose families have lost a parent or are experiencing a divorce.

"I can't stress enough how important this issue is to me," says Allen. "I refer people to Rainbows all the time."

Marta says that presenting at the think tank was a professionally and personally enriching experience. She describes Allen and her legal partner, Ron Ladden, as "compassionate."

"They care for their clients; they care about the impact of the divorce on the children—not just the minor children, but the adult children," says Marta. "It's very palpable in the conversations you have with them."

Ladden and Allen Chartered is currently applying for recognition of continuing legal education credit for their think tanks.

There is no such thing as a typical client in Allen's firm, but they have at least one shared need—legal counsel.

"We try to be responsive to who we see in front of us and what they're going through," says Allen. "You are a counselor at law."

When clients are going through a divorce, they're going through a lot. Divorce law is a marriage of a number of disciplines and a host of different legal areas of focus. Allen welcomes the challenge and the learning opportunities.

"There is constantly a learning curve, no matter how much you think you know," says Allen. "I love to learn new things."

Is Remedy Cost-Effective?

Income, marital assets, and mortgages are factors in deciding the most cost-effective solutions for her clients. Allen says that making cost-effective decisions comes down to legal rights versus legal remedies.

"Does every legal right have a remedy? Theoretically, yes, but does every legal right have a remedy that's cost effective?" asks Allen.

She concedes that while settling is economically preferable in most circumstances, especially in custody cases, she must also be ready to litigate.

"You can't really negotiate from a position of strength unless you can also litigate, if that's where you need to be," says Allen.

Michele F. Lowrance, judge in the Circuit Court of Cook County and author of "The Good Karma Divorce," has known Allen for around 25 years. She says Allen has an incredible amount of class and never brings animosity into the courtroom.

Lowrance regards Allen as a "truly compassionate and innovative problem-solver," and says she has seen Allen "enhance the strengths of her clients."

Allen was first married at 21, during her third year of law school.

"I did not know how to get married, how to have children, and how to have a career," reflects Allen. "I'm not sure anybody gets it completely right."

Allen says her career in law allowed her to take time to be with her children when they were younger. She lives her belief that women can enjoy success well into their careers.

Allen co-wrote a book with Lowrance and financial guru Terry Savage exploring the rights attached to the legal implications of marriage. She expects the publisher will release "The New Love Deal: This is Not Your Parents' Marriage" during the next two to three months.

Allen also writes blogs on family issues for Today's Chicago Woman, a magazine for professional women, and makes appearances on television and radio shows to comment on family law in the context of current events. She appeared on Channel 26 to comment on former CIA Director David Petraeus' November 2012 resignation.

Allen has been happily married for 16 years. She and her husband have four children between them, and six grandchildren.

"I see the sons-in-law and my husband's son all willing to step in," she says, "and really realizing that it takes a village to raise a child."

■