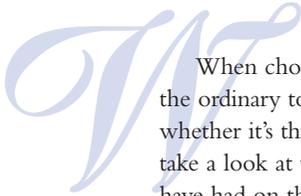


# All in the Family Parent-Child Law Partners

By Hannah Hayes



When choosing a career, it's not that out of the ordinary to follow in a parent's footsteps, whether it's the law or a trade. In this issue, we take a look at the influence some parent lawyers have had on their children in the legal profession and otherwise. We talked to three mother-daughter teams that have formed unique partnerships and a father-daughter team that learned a lesson negotiating personnel and family issues.

## **Sharing a Dream: Christina and Trinette Pitts**

*When she retired from the Milwaukee County court system, Christina Pitts was noted for being “a quiet force.” Not only did she pursue her dream of becoming a lawyer during a span of 30 years, but she also gently prodded her daughter into the career she worked so long to achieve.*

Christina Pitts always knew she wanted to be a lawyer. In 1961 when she left college to marry and raise a family, the aspiration to be a lawyer burned as brightly as ever. Her interest in the law drew her to take a job as a clerk typist in the Milwaukee County court system while she raised her two children. At that time, there were few women lawyers and judges, and only a small percentage were African American. “I was motivated by the fact that the numbers were so few, and having women in the law was important,” she recalls.

Christina quietly but quite consciously “steered” her daughter Trinette in that direction. “She was very interested in [the law], and I knew she would be good at it.”

Trinette was unaware of her mother’s intent. “I never remember her telling me to go into law,” Trinette says. “When I was in high school, I would come and watch the proceedings between classes. It was all very intriguing.”

She was also surprised when her mother began making plans to join her in law school. Christina had finished her undergraduate degree during eight years while working her way up to become deputy clerk, and mother and daughter graduated from different schools on the same day. Trinette enrolled in law school at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, but Christina decided to wait. “I wanted to make sure Trinette was secure.”

A year later, she followed her daughter to Madison, where they set up house and studied together. “People would look at me and say, ‘You’re going to live with your mom?’ But it was great.” The family commuted between Milwaukee and Madison on weekends and holidays to be together.

At law school, it became apparent that the two women were compatible in more ways than one. When they partnered to do a mock trial, their law professor commented

that they complemented each other well because Trinette “went for the jugular” and the soft-spoken Christina “smoothed ruffled feathers.”

Trinette graduated and took a job in a private firm to gain some experience. A year later, Christina returned to the Wisconsin court system—this time as a lawyer. The two then decided to hang a shingle of their own. “We thought if it didn’t work, at least we tried. But we’ve been together ever since,” Christina says.

After 22 years in practice, Trinette says she’s still learning from her mother. “She saw a lot on the

**“I’m always learning something from my mother to make me a better lawyer and a better listener.”**

**—Trinette Pitts**

other side of the bench, so I learned the practical aspect of it,” she explains. “But what I learned most was how to treat people. I’m always learning something from her to make me a better lawyer and a better listener.”

### **Krasnogor & Krasnogor: Immigration Law Specialists**

*Norine Krasnogor’s background in immigration activism gave her a niche that prompted her to open her own office. Daughter Julie initially came on board to help temporarily, but the two women found their international interests dovetailed nicely and expanded their business into two cities.*

When people first encounter the firm Krasnogor & Krasnogor, they’re surprised to hear it’s a mother-daughter team. “Everyone assumes I work with my father,” Julie Krasnogor says. “I think they’re very impressed when they find out it’s my mother, but there’s always that assumption.” For Julie, working with

her mother in their Connecticut law firm has its distinct advantages. “It’s still a man’s world. Especially being a young lawyer, there are some barriers in terms of credibility, so it’s nice to be a team,” Julie points out.

Krasnogor & Krasnogor specializes in immigration law, a field that came from Norine’s background in community work on immigration issues. Norine went to law school after raising her three children and opened an immigration law office in 1988. Ten years later, she was joined by her daughter Julie.

“I was not entirely surprised when Julie went to law school. But I was surprised that she wanted to work with me,” Norine says. “It was flattering.”

Although Julie didn’t make a conscious choice to follow in her mother’s footsteps, Norine definitely served as a role model. “Now that I’m older, I see a lot of things about me and my professional work that are similar to what my mother has always done,” Julie says. “I didn’t consciously think, ‘I want to be like my mom and go to law school.’ But as an adult, I’m very involved with advocacy groups and community activism and a lot of volunteer work—just as she was.”

Julie’s cultural interests led her to spend time in France, and her interest in “all things international” seemed to fit naturally with her mother’s specialty. In their practice, their approaches seem to complement each other’s, and both women have things they respect and have learned about the other.

“I tend to be rather laidback, while Julie is very efficient and quick,” Norine says. “That balance has worked out wonderfully.”

Six years ago, Julie opened a New York office. The two make a point to schedule personal “mother-daughter time” outside their work responsibilities. “We make dates to go to the museum, to have lunch, or instead of her running back [home], we will occasionally say let’s have dinner together. But we don’t crowd each

other,” Norine says.

Julie agrees. “We have similar interests outside the practice, and we really get along very well. Sometimes we might get frustrated with each other, which is what happens with all coworkers, but when it’s a family member, you can just say, ‘Leave me alone!’ You can’t say that to a coworker. We operate independently at times, but we speak to each other every day and share caseloads. But she’s very respectful of my space.”

### **Cross-Country: Laura and Julia Rothstein**

*Both Julia Bennett and mother Laura Rothstein agree her parents did not “make” Julia go into law. However, they did influence her decision to go to law school, and the result was a unique partnership that spans the country.*

Julia Bennett always knew she wanted to be a performer. So how did she end up not only attending law school, but also coauthoring with her mother a book, *Disabilities and the Law*, between Petco commercials, comic improv, and appearances on *The West Wing* and *ER*?

“I didn’t have a fallback plan, and I didn’t want to wait tables,” says Bennett, who adds that her background dictated that she pursue “some form of higher education.” With two lawyer parents—both are law professors at the University of Louisville—it seemed like a logical choice. “We certainly didn’t dissuade her,” Laura Rothstein recalls. “It’s a good background to have, and you can always do things with it.”

So Bennett followed her mother’s footsteps and went to Georgetown University, graduating in 2002. Almost immediately, she left for Los Angeles, where she works as a stand-up comic. Between acting jobs, Bennett works as a research assistant for both parents, and this year she coauthored the third edition of *Disabilities and the Law* with her mother.

Both mother and daughter agree that working together has been a positive experience. “She was doing

a fair amount of work on the pocket parts [of the books], and we’re able to work together,” Rothstein says. For the latest edition, the pair spent a weekend going over the book chapter by chapter to hammer out changes. “Ninety-eight percent of the time we were in total agreement,” Bennett says. “We approach things very similarly, and she’s not a hard person to work with.”

Bennett also points out that her background in a family where both parents are lawyers had an impact. “She really is the pioneer leader in this field of law, so I’ve been staring

“Working with my daughter helped me to see the humor in situations and not take myself or my job so seriously.”

—Jim Johnson

at this over the dinner table since I was a little kid. It wasn’t like it was brand new.”

“I wouldn’t say they made me go to law school, but I’d say they chose my fallback plan,” Bennett says. “I would never enjoy practicing law in the traditional sense. Even so, they couldn’t have been better role models, and they are really good mentors to me,” Bennett says.

### **Jim and Erika Johnson: Dad and Daughter**

*A small town like Kalispell, Montana, can hold only so many lawyers. So when Erika Johnson and her husband decided to move to Erika’s hometown of 17,000, they were happy to find a place in her father’s firm of Johnson, Berg, McEvoy & Bostock.*

Without a doubt, Erika Johnson says her father was “hugely influen-

tial” in her decision to enter law school. After graduating with a degree in economics, Erika took a year off and then had a heart-to-heart talk with her father. “He really encouraged me and told me there were still things you could do because it’s a flexible degree. You’re not stuck practicing law if you don’t want to, but it would have a lot of use later in life.”

When Johnson, Berg, McEvoy & Bostock hired Erika, Jim was concerned about how his partners would feel about having his daughter and son-in-law in the same firm, so he made a decision to stay apart from personnel issues.

“If we had grievances or problems, it was understood we should go to other partners, and my dad would stay out of decisions. Nobody wanted appearances of impropriety,” Erika says. But when personality conflicts between Erika and some partners did arise, Erika found it very difficult not to go to her father for help.

After Erika left the firm in 2004 to raise her young family, Jim took over the management of the firm and had second thoughts about that policy. “Since then, I’ve learned a lot from her about the various personalities in the office and how to look at them much more objectively and the effect they have on people. She didn’t say anything at the time, but I wish I had cast that policy aside.”

In 2002, the Montana State Bar Association honored both father and daughter with a professionalism award for pro bono work. “I think any lawyer owes to the bar some sort of duty to give back, and that’s one of the things I think I passed on to Erika,” Jim says.

Working with his daughter taught Jim to see the lighter side of life. “Sometimes we’d look at each other and wink, and she helped me to see the humor in situations and not take myself or my job so seriously.”

*Hannah Hayes is a Chicago area freelance writer.*