

The Toughest Job You'll Ever Love: Family Law

By Amy Hamlin

Family law seems to be an ambiguous practice area to people on “the outside.” When I tell people I am a family law lawyer, most assume that I draft wills and trusts. However, a family law lawyer is not the person you want for your probate needs. Most family law lawyers deal with the dissolution of marriages, custody battles, and paternity disputes, as well as the modification and enforcement of such cases. They also take occasional out-of-the-ordinary cases (more about that later).

The lawyers in my field are some of the hardest working lawyers in the profession and must have knowledge of many areas of law. The hours can be demanding and some of the work is stressful, but I encourage you not to shy away from family law, because it can be the toughest job you'll ever love.

Neither my law school classes nor clinics prepared me for the cases I would get as a family law lawyer. One of the first cases I had while in public service was a client who needed help admitting a family member to a healthcare facility. The family member was a disabled, orphaned minor. My client had never officially obtained guardianship of the minor and thus was unable to sign the necessary papers for the minor's transfer to the facility. If no action was taken within the week, the bed would be lost, along with the free care. Fortunately, we were able to have a judge to sign the necessary order, and, by the end of the week, my client's relative was off to the facility to receive much-needed care.

Cases like these can be very personally fulfilling. I also find that the variety of cases in family law keeps my job engaging. One of my favorite clients was an elderly man who wanted to divorce his third wife because she refused to cook and clean for him anymore. Recently, I represented a father who objected to the mother of their young child relocating out of state. While in law school, preparing to be a family law attorney, I never imagined all of these different factual scenarios and disputes that arise in real life.

The diversity of cases we take requires us to know at least a little about many areas of law. We need to be familiar with real property and probate law, contract law, criminal law, immigration law, tax law, corporate law, and civil law. I have had cases dealing with tax fraud, defamation, personal injury, domestic violence, and children with special needs. Family law lawyers must understand these matters and properly address them in the relevant context, which often is in dissolution proceedings.

Family law also offers many satisfying opportunities outside of the office. Every local bar association has a family law section. For example, the Family Law Section of the Florida Bar is extremely active and always welcomes new faces. In 2008, the Florida legislature passed a new parenting bill that requires parties in cases with children to file a parenting plan. That summer, I joined the Rules and Forms committee of the Florida Bar's Family Law Section and was named chair of a subcommittee to review drafts of parenting plans from various circuits.

There are many opportunities to become involved with family law at the grassroots level in your communities, whether as your chosen area of practice or through pro bono work. I encourage you to make a difference, get involved, and use your newly learned legal skills responsibly to help families.

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