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Holy de Toledo!

Victoria de Toledo loves a good David v. Goliath case

by NAN LEVINSON photography by TOM KUTZ

“I think a lot of lawyers forget the human part of their own existence and it’s important in the whole process to be human,” says Victoria de Toledo. “Human and humane. Both.”

De Toledo, an employment law partner at Casper & de Toledo in Stamford, studs her speech with words that don’t figure prominently in law books: nice, comfortable, humane. She’s talking about the value of balancing work life with family life and her commitment—one of her soapboxes, she calls it—to inserting that balance into the practice of law.

This doesn’t mean she’s not a committed lawyer. She relishes every aspect of her work, from researching and writing briefs to presenting cases to juries and pulling everything together in closing arguments. She has lectured on employment and discrimination, co-founded and chaired the Connecticut Employment Lawyers Association and was tapped to join the selective College of Labor and Employment Lawyers.

It was while interning in the public defender’s office during her sophomore year at the University of Pennsylvania that de Toledo realized law was her calling; and it was while working for an equal employment opportunity officer the following year that she zeroed in on employment law. After law school at New York University, she moved to Connecticut and went into private practice. “I love the idea of going after bad guys,” she says. “I love the idea of trying to get justice for those people who are victimized. And I also love the experience—it’s so trite, but it’s true—of helping people.”

De Toledo, 53, grew up on Long Island

and traveled the world from a young age, thanks to her father’s position as an airline executive. Travel was a great education, she says, one she has tried to give to her children, a son, daughter and two stepdaughters, all now grown. “To learn about different cultures and to realize that there’s a whole world out there beyond our own is just so great for a child to experience and comprehend.”

Though it would be tidy to link that insight to her do-gooder instinct, she draws a different connection. “I think it made me realize that there are all sorts of differences in people, and those things should be valued, as opposed to submerged or repressed,” de Toledo says. “That’s what helped me click with civil rights and employment discrimination.”

The other partner at the four-attorney firm is her husband, Stewart Casper, who specializes in personal injury law. Eight years ago, the firm moved into an old house near downtown Stamford. They gutted the place, painted it in cream colors, polished the wood floors, arranged comfortable furniture in congenial groupings, and hung lots of art by local artists. “The office does reflect who we are,” says de Toledo, eager to show it off—all the way to the basement, where they keep the “body parts,” anatomical models used for personal injury cases. “We wanted to make it homey so clients would come in and go, ‘Ahhh.’ It should be a place where people can let down their guard.”

Her clients range from top-level executives crafting contracts to factory workers contesting discrimination, harassment or termination. Both de Toledo and Casper enjoy taking on David v. Goliath cases. “They all sort of feel that way because I represent one employee against an employer and the

employer almost always has much larger resources and access to many more witnesses than an employee does,” she says.

To counter that imbalance, de Toledo relies on the facts of the case. She has always felt at home in the courtroom and that ease informs everything she does there. “Be honest, be real, and don’t hide from the problems in your case,” she advises; juries can’t be manipulated and they have no sympathy for plaintiffs. “There is a group of eight, 10 people that don’t know each other, that don’t know you. They have nothing to gain or lose in the process. They’re going to be the most skeptical people you’ll ever encounter.”

She believes that juries usually do what’s fair, regardless of complicated legal stipulations, which is why she thinks the Supreme Court’s recent ruling on age discrimination, one of her specialties, will make little difference in trials. “The court made it easier for employers to defend themselves from age discrimination cases,” she says, “though I’m not sure the decision is really going to have any effect on how a jury will ultimately decide these types of cases.”

De Toledo’s respect for juries is reciprocated—she wins most of her cases and gets good awards for her clients. She’s quick to add that her success is also a result of choosing cases with good facts and avoiding those she doesn’t believe in. Plus, many of her cases are settled out of court. Sexual harassment cases, for instance, seldom go to trial, though she finds sexual harassment still quite prevalent. “Bigots in the workplace have gotten more clandestine about their bigotry,” she says. Similarly, “No one [these days] will say, ‘Oh, women should just be secretaries.’ But sexual harassment, there’s something about



it that’s ...” She shakes her head, wondering at its staying power, and concludes, “Sexual harassment is going to be one of the tougher things to eliminate in the workplace.”

De Toledo’s efforts to level the playing field aren’t limited to litigation. She has been relaxing in her chair, answering questions in a steady voice, but she leans forward and her voice grows animated as she talks about the two teenagers she has been mentoring for the past three years. Both live in single-parent families with few resources and limited prospects. Though de Toledo had volunteered for many years with a family-service organization in Norwalk, it was eye-opening for her to see

the hardship of these teens’ lives.

“Things that we take for granted, reading a book at bedtime, things that are just second nature for us are completely foreign [to them],” she says. “If everybody’s scrambling, there’s no one in any of these kids’ extended family who can give them a ray of hope that if they work hard and do well, they can get somewhere. It feels like my David versus Goliath cases are a snap compared to this situation.”

This brings us back to the importance of life balance, which de Toledo illustrates with a story about telling a judge that she couldn’t meet a deadline he was proposing because it

conflicted with her child care. Not only did the judge try to accommodate her, but the opposing counsel said that he had four children and scheduling issues too. “In 30 seconds it changed things,” says de Toledo. “Lawyers are so scared about, oh, don’t let anyone know you’re a person or you’re the mother or you’re human. I think all that’s false.”

“Having a balance with family increases our capacity to understand. It makes us better at what we do, and if everyone jumped on board, if we said to ourselves and everyone else, ‘You know, I have a rich family life, I have a rich work life, they’re equally important,’ it could happen.” ◀