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Energy field: Family law attorney fueled by desire to 'do good'



Despite her diminutive stature, attorney Annette Benson has been described as "a pit bull in heels" for her advocacy skills, helping clients "find their voice and new beginnings."

By Tom Kirvan
Legal News

For a lawyer who makes her living in the sometimes unforgiving world of family law, Annette Benson takes pride in being the "most anti-divorce attorney that I know."

If that sounds counter-intuitive, then that offers just one glimpse into a life where doubt was seemingly an ever-present companion and success was anything but assured.

But Benson, now nearly two decades after founding Annette Benson Law in Bingham Farms, can take comfort in knowing that success has been achieved, earning recognition from dBusiness, The Detroit Jewish News, Super Lawyers, and Lawyers of Distinction for her legal and courtroom prowess.

Such honors, she admitted, were built upon an academic foundation that wasn't necessarily rock solid.

"On paper, I didn't look particularly good," said Benson, who grew up in Oak Park with two older brothers, Paul and Mike, one a future lawyer and the other a prospective psychologist. "My grades weren't great and I didn't exactly excel on the standardized tests to get into college and law school."

So, without an eye-popping GPA or LSAT score, Benson resorted to another measure when it came time to get noticed by the law school admissions department at the University of Detroit Mercy.

"I let myself do the talking, putting a constant bug in their ear about why they should give me a chance and admit me to law school," she said with a hint of a smile. "I honestly think that I just wore them out by being so persistent and so confident that I could do well if given the opportunity."

Once in law school, Benson continued to hone her persuasive skills, "talking my way" into clerkship jobs with Wayne County Circuit Judge Richard Hathaway and family law attorney Seymour Markowitz, whose unconventional ways resonated with his new assistant.

"He was so comfortable in his own skin, saying what he wanted to say, when he wanted to say it," Benson said. "It was totally refreshing because he genuinely cared about his clients and the issues they were facing. I wanted to be like that. From the start, I made a commitment to stay true to myself, to 'do good' whenever possible."

That lesson was reinforced by her parents, Jewish immigrants who fled Europe during the years enveloping World War II and its immediate aftermath. Theirs was an arranged marriage that defied the odds in terms of longevity and the happiness quotient, according to Benson.

"With the wave of anti-Semitism that engulfed Europe at the time, they somehow escaped and made it to America, beginning a new life where there was an opportunity to succeed," Benson said of her parents, Shoshana and Arthur Byck. "Many members of their families were not as fortunate.

"I was raised in a family where English was not the language used in the home," Benson said. "Imagine the challenge of that in a new country."

Despite the language barrier, her father became a tool and die designer for an auto supply company, living the "American Dream" for his growing family.

"My dad always carried around a small notebook and pencil for when he had a design idea," said Benson, who for years has followed suit "for the times when I have a random thought" worth preserving. "He was the hardest working person I've ever known. He did what it took to provide all the necessities for his family."

Benson's mother, now 76 and a resident of Florida some 15 years after her husband died unexpectedly, has always displayed a "special sense of compassion," welcoming those down on their luck or in need of companionship, particularly at holiday time.

"We had an open-door policy at our home and my mom was always the jokester, making everyone feel like they were part of our family," Benson said.

"She doesn't have a filter, which definitely is a character trait that I inherited from her."

A strong belief system in distinguishing "right and wrong" also has marked Benson's legal career, which began with a four-year stint working for the American Divorce Association for Men, aptly known as "ADAM." Her decision to leave the firm came after she reached a moral crossroads.

"I was representing a man in a custody case who was accused of molesting one of his children," Benson explained. "He had a history of abuse, so I sent him for a private polygraph to help me determine whether he was telling the truth in this case."

The polygraph test made it clear that he wasn't, Benson indicated.

"So, here was a client seeking 50-50 custody of children he likely would continue to abuse," she said. "In good conscience, I couldn't continue to represent someone I didn't believe in and was likely to cause more harm to his children. It just wasn't right."

After a year with another firm and then time as a stay-at-home mom raising her two children, Benson decided to branch out on her own.

"I realized in a hurry that being a full-time stay-at-home parent is the toughest job in the world," Benson said, noting conversely that she also missed the challenge inherent in a legal career.

She launched her firm with a radio ad blitz on the popular Jim Harper morning show on WNIC-FM.

"I was listening to him on the radio one morning when I decided that it might jump-start my firm if I advertised on his program," Benson related. "So, I called the station and said I wanted to advertise, which is the opposite, of course, of the way it generally works."

Coincidentally, she called on a day when the station was offering a "once a year" sales package designed to lure potential advertisers.

"I bought a \$15,000 package, money that I didn't necessarily have in hand at the time," she said. "It was a real leap of faith that it would pay off." Fortunately for Benson, it did.

"The phones went absolutely crazy with callers saying, 'I want to hire you.' I wasn't prepared for the kind of response I was getting from the ads. It was unbelievable," Benson recalled.

Suddenly, the solo practitioner was in a hiring mood, adding another attorney and a legal assistant to her staff.

"Up until then, I saw myself simply as a lawyer, but I was forced to see myself as a business owner as well, which adds another layer of responsibilities," Benson said.

The dual role plays out in a constant tug-of-war for her time, which is at a premium for someone juggling 20 to 25 cases at once.

"Because of that, I've had to be more selective with the cases that I take," Benson acknowledged, "especially since I want to be responsive to questions or concerns that clients have. I never lose sight of the fact that they are going through perhaps the most difficult time of their life and I need to be there for them."

Such as when she was retained years ago by a woman who was seeking to divorce a husband she considered "totally controlling." In a sense, he was, but in a way that revealed other intentions, Benson discovered.

"When I was able to get them in the same room together, a clearer picture emerged," Benson related. "When she told him that he was so 'controlling,' he got this glaze over his eyes and said to me, 'I was just trying to be helpful because she manages so much for our household.' All of a sudden, his tendency to be controlling took on a different light."

Within a few minutes and at Benson's encouragement, the couple began to reconnect, softening headline stances for the good of their marriage.

"A month later, they reconciled," Benson said with a special sense of satisfaction. "I may have helped open the door, but they had the courage to walk through it. Stories like that make all the night and weekend work worth it."

Old saying proves true for divorce lawyer

By Tom Kirvan
Legal News

In the field of romance, "love at first sight" is one of the most common tropes in Western fiction.

And yet there is nothing fictional or fanciful about Annette Benson's belief in the shopworn phrase.

She's living it.

Her first brush with the saying took place following her sophomore year at Michigan State, where she was pursuing a degree in political science as a stepping-stone to law school.

"I was home for the summer and needed a job," Benson said, matter-of-factly. "I was with my mom and my grandmother running a few errands when we stopped at a bulk food store on Maple. I decided to run in to see if they had a summer job for me."

Her query drew the attention of a store manager, Mitch, who just happened to be the son of the business owners.

"I was eager for an answer and couldn't understand why it was taking him so long to make a decision," Benson explained. "After all, I was smart, enthusiastic, and I needed a job. What else did he need to know?"

Just one thing, she soon discovered.

Could she answer a simple math question in her head?

"The next thing he said," Benson recalled, "was 'What's 10 percent of 80?' Fortunately, I answered, 'eight.'"

With that magical number, a romance was born, at least in a young woman's mind.

"I went back to the car and told my mother and grandmother that I had just met the man I was going to marry. Simple as that," Benson said, noting that her pronouncement was greeted with various forms of incredulity.

But five years later in 1994, Annette and Mitch became one, starting a marriage that reached the silver anniversary milestone last year. It has produced two offspring — a 23-year-old son Jonah, a marketing student at Grand Valley State University, and his 20-year-old sister Lia, a pre-med student at MSU, her mother's alma mater. In addition, it has framed two successful careers, hers as a family law attorney and his as a Certified Financial Planner.

Their marriage also has spawned a shared love of travel, hiking, and running, including marathon finishes at the Magic Kingdom of Disney World. Last month, in the wake of the pandemic, they added another member to their family — a Goldendoodle puppy.

"Yes, another case of love at first sight," Benson repeated. "I'm a believer."

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