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Matters of the Heart

For **Chari M. Alson** and her fellow attorneys at Anderson Elder Law, the ability to support older adults and their families begins with a bedrock of genuine compassion.

The most important attribute an elder law attorney must possess likely will not come from anything they learned in law school. Rather, it will come from the heart.

"You must have empathy in this job," says Chari M. Alson, a Certified Elder Law Attorney and senior associate at Anderson Elder Law. "You have to really care what happens to the elderly. Here, it starts with Linda Anderson, our fabulous leader who started the firm. Everyone within this firm genuinely cares about people. You can't do this job without caring about people."

Fifteen years ago, when Anderson

founded the firm, caring was a philosophical cornerstone. Whether a client needs help with life care planning, estate and tax planning, special needs planning, Medicaid planning, or some other issue, the compassionate team at Anderson Elder Law will formulate a customized approach to help the client move forward with confidence.

"We start with the perspective of taking care of folks," says Alson, who has practiced in the areas of estate planning, estate and trust administration, and elder law for the past 19 years, and joined Anderson Elder Law four years ago. "Elder law is about supporting older adults and their families, and helping them navigate the long-term healthcare system and prepare them for disability and death. You have to be very sensitive to their needs and situation, and we are."

There are two common reasons to seek out an elder law attorney—either for advance planning or to confront a profound crisis. Examples of advance planning would involve matters such as appointing a medical power of attorney and formulating a living will.

"People who want to do advance planning can come to me from a narrow perspective," Alson says. "They might call and ask for a will, but through our conversation I try to guide them to understanding that what they actually need is an estate plan. Our initial appointments are real work sessions where we review not only the assets and current documents, but the client's goals, their family, and their family dynamics, among other things. We want clients to come away with a plan that gives them peace of mind, and with our team we are able to deliver on that objective."

The dynamic changes when a client comes to her in crisis. In these matters, an empathetic approach helps the client get through a stressful time.

"When clients approach us in crisis, they're understandably upset," Alson says. "Maybe they've got a loved one in the hospital, and they're getting conflicting information from Google; I call it 'Google panic.' They don't know how to separate different strands of information, and don't know how to process it because their loved one is sick. On our team, we have lawyers, but also an elder care coordinator who helps them understand advocacy and transitions."

For example, a client may have an elderly father who is being discharged from the hospital but cannot go home because there is no one there to provide care. In these cases, Alson can help answer a looming question: "Where can he go?" The elder care coordinator would perform an assessment for the client, give the family a thorough understanding of the situation, and help formulate a plan of care.

Alson's interest in elder law began while she was attending Rutgers University. She got a job as a nursing assistant at a nearby psychiatric hospital, and was assigned to the geriatric unit. The experience sparked her curiosity about the healthcare system, a curiosity which blossomed in law school. Today, she cannot imagine working in any other career.

Alson is a member of the Pennsylvania Academy of Elder Law Attorneys and the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys (NAELA). She serves as co-chair of the Elder Law Committee of the Delaware County Bar Association, is a board member of the Chester County Estate Planning Council, co-editor of the Pennsylvania Bar Association Elder Law Section Newsletter, and is a member of the NAELA news editorial board. She is also a contributing author and lecturer on elder law, including for the Pennsylvania Bar Institute.

"My first job when anyone comes to see me is to come around the table and sit beside them," Alson says. "I reassure them. I ask them what it is that's keeping them up at night. I will support them and try to give them peace of mind. After that happens, then I can make them aware of things that should be top of mind. Because we here at Anderson Elder Law have that approach, clients are more comfortable and know we have the kind of caring team that will deliver results for them." ■

Chari M. Alson



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