



# suburbanlife

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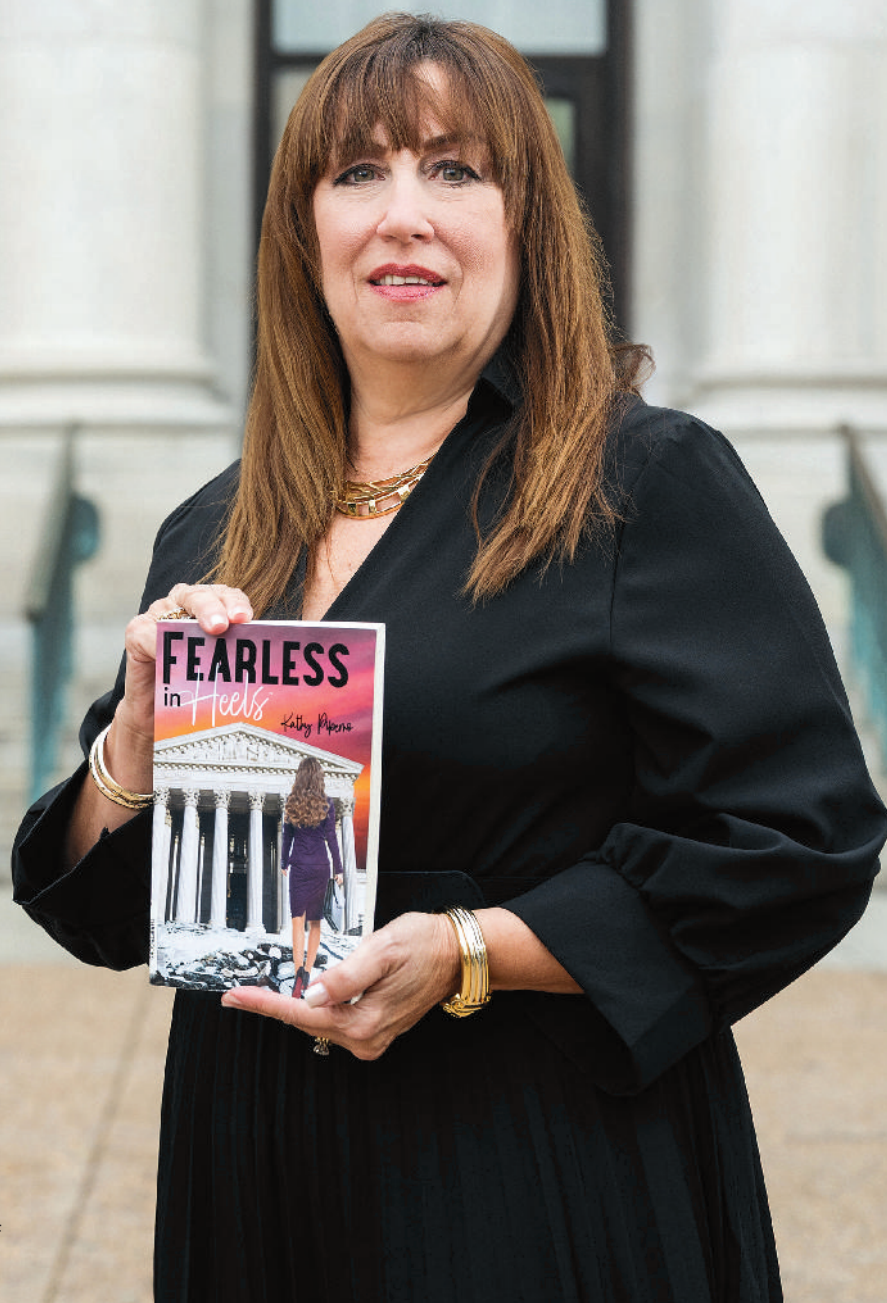
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A survivor of domestic violence, **Kathleen Piperno** has become an outspoken advocate for victims of abuse—as a family law attorney and as the author of an award-winning book. Page 14



# FEARLESS

A survivor of domestic violence, **Kathleen Piperno** has become an outspoken advocate for victims of abuse—as a family law attorney and as the author of an award-winning book.



Kathleen Piperno, an attorney at Eckell Sparks and the co-managing partner of the firm's Family Law Division, with her book, *Fearless in Heels*

**There was a time when the idea of writing a book about her personal experience with domestic violence was unthinkable for Kathleen Piperno. For more than 30 years, she kept the ordeal hidden from her family, friends, clients, and colleagues, even after becoming a highly successful family law attorney with expertise in such cases.**

All that changed after becoming a Board Member for the Domestic Abuse Project. While attending their annual Board Meeting, the Members were asked their reasons for contributing to the nonprofit, she realized it was time to share her story.

"I thought: *Oh God, I have to say it*," Piperno recalls. "So, I revealed the truth for the first time and immediately the Board Member sitting next to me said, 'I was abused by my husband.' Both of us were shocked to hear about the abuse of the other. Immediately after the meeting, we looked at each other teary-eyed and hugged, knowing that we finally revealed it."

Piperno, an attorney at Eckell Sparks and the co-managing partner of the firm's Family Law Division, eventually made the brave decision to write a fictionalized account of her experience. Her novel *Fearless in Heels* portrays a young woman's escape from an abusive boyfriend and her journey to a loving marriage and a flourishing career. The book was published in 2021 and received a Book Excellence Award the following year.

Putting her past down on paper was not an easy process, but Piperno knew it was something she had to do to increase awareness about the escalating domestic violence crisis.

"My publisher encouraged and pushed me to tell the story—she wanted all of it out there, and that was difficult," she says. "It was difficult to relive what I went through and to write it at the same time, but it was the proper release for me to get that all out so people would understand that it happens. Most people don't understand that it occurs so often and victims don't understand that they deserve a relationship free of domestic violence; you're not stuck with him or her."

"In my caseload, every other case involves some sort of abuse," she continues. "It's overwhelming and it's unconscionable. It doesn't matter how much money you make or how educated you are. A perpetrator has either a mental health issue, an addiction, or a generational trauma that has caused him or her to cross the line into domestic violence."

Piperno recently celebrated her five-year anniversary at Eckell Sparks, which she joined at the urging of a longtime friend and colleague, Craig B. Huffman, Esq., with whom she manages the Family Law Division. The department has grown significantly since her arrival, by naming Melanie Tunaitis, Esq., as a Partner, and by adding two new Associates, Vasiliki Gouliaberis, Esq., and Ashley Valdes, Esq.—all women, Piperno points out. The firm's support staff has grown to include four

paralegals—Marie, Collette, Eileen, and AJ—and Terry, the fearless bill collector, each of whom works tirelessly for clients and during attorneys' court preparation.

For her part, Piperno has seen a steady stream of clients who are drawn to her nearly three decades of experience and the fact that she can relate to their circumstances.

"Because I survived domestic violence, I have received many referrals for protection from abuse cases, both women and men,"



*I have an understanding of the emotional toll caused by every aspect of the case—divorce, support, and custody—in addition to expertise in the domestic violence arena, having lived it and practiced it for almost 30 years."*

—Kathleen Piperno,  
Eckell Sparks

Piperno says. "They can see that I am a domestic violence advocate and ... that I have an understanding of the emotional toll caused by every aspect of the case—divorce, support, and custody—in addition to expertise in the domestic violence arena, having lived it and practiced it for almost 30 years."

Clients who hire Piperno will get a direct approach; there is no sugarcoating with her. She prides herself on being a fierce advocate who is prepared to fight for them every step of the way, especially if the case ends up in court.

"I am very outspoken and I have a method for how I do things," she says. "I tend to empower my clients. You want to empower people to speak for themselves, because they weren't able to speak for themselves before."

Piperno's initial career aspirations were outside of the legal realm. During college in San Francisco, however, she was hired as a legal secretary, and the two partners encouraged her to pursue a career in the law and even hoped she would take over the firm someday. Instead, she moved back to Pennsylvania for law school and stayed put after meeting the man who would become her husband; they have been married for 28 years and share a son.

After starting out with her own practice in personal injury, she was recruited by a one-time adversary who "liked my style," where she transitioned to family law. She stayed there for 18 years until Huffman—a former opponent who ended up becoming an ally—convinced her to join him at Eckell Sparks.

"I'm very, very happy at Eckell Sparks, which was a male-dominated practice for many years, but it is no longer," she adds. "Craig is the only male [in the department] and he's just really great to work with. He alleges that I 'cursed him out' during our first case, and that's when he knew he had to hire me. We are opposites, but we get along very, very well and have for years."

Piperno now shares her personal story openly at speaking engagements, seminars with fellow attorneys, and book signings. *Fearless in Heels* is available for order on Amazon as well.

Likewise, she enjoys mentoring younger generations, whether it's the attorneys at Eckell Sparks, college interns, or high school students interested in the law.

"I represent four clients whose daughters want to become lawyers because of me, because each has said that I saved their mom," Piperno says. "Those young women are daughters from four different families; two of them are currently in law school now, and the other two will soon be attending law school. I think that's really cool. ... I don't have daughters, so it's rewarding to have them look up to me." ■

**Eckell Sparks**

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