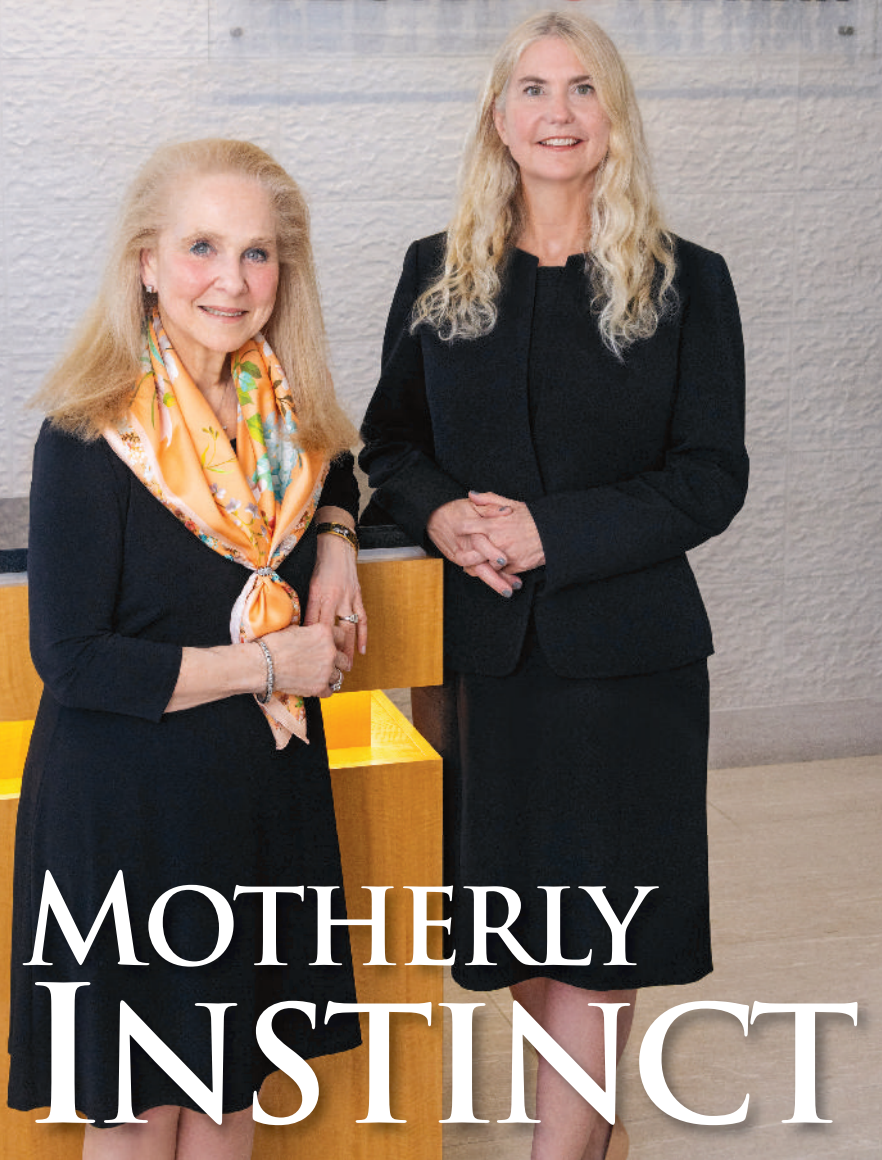


Lydia Fabbro Keephart (left) and Sherri L. Warfel

PELLETTIERI RABSTEIN & ALTMAN



MOTHERLY INSTINCT

Motherhood has taught **PELLETTIERI RABSTEIN & ALTMAN** attorneys Lydia Fabbro Keephart and Sherri L. Warfel life-changing lessons in compassion, resilience, and perspective.

BY **BILL DONAHUE**
PHOTOS BY **ALISON DUNLAP**

L Lydia Fabbro Keephart and Sherri L. Warfel consider themselves “blessed” to have challenging and fulfilling careers as attorneys with the same firm, Lawrenceville, New Jersey-based Pellettieri Rabstein & Altman (PR&A). The rewards of their work are manifold, yet Keephart and Warfel share another experience they consider even more enriching and, in some respects, more demanding: motherhood.

“The most important job in the world is being a parent,” says Keephart, a partner with PR&A who practices family law. She was 32 years old when she and her husband, William J. (Bill) Keephart, CPA, welcomed

their son, Jonathan Fabbro Keephart.

“Life changed dramatically for me when I became a mother,” she adds. “Jonathan means ‘Gift from God,’ and he has lived out that title without even trying. He is our pride and joy. Today, we have the privilege of watching Jonathan be an exemplary parent.”

Children have always had a special place in Keephart’s heart. Despite her ambitions to be a lawyer, she started her career in education. She found this to be a challenging and exciting profession, crediting her brilliant students for sharing thoughtful perspectives on literature and their contemporary experiences. While she enjoyed teaching high school students, she earned her graduate degree and then worked at ETS, traveling extensively to represent the company. Keephart was inspired by her exceptional colleagues and experiences, yet she quietly decided to get back on her path to pursue the study of law.

At age 36, she began her legal journey at Seton Hall School of Law with the intention to pursue environmental law. Serving as law clerk to the Hon. Maria Marinari Sypek (ret.) exposed Keephart to family law. Keephart has since been assisting clients through compelling legal and emotional challenges for nearly 35 years, all of which she has spent with PR&A. She cherishes the opportunity to represent those who are, in her words, “the best people at the worst time in their lives.”

“Children need the love and affection of both parents, and so I especially support a dad’s role being respected in custody disputes,” she says. “As a woman, I find it disconcerting that anyone would want to take away a father’s right to parent his child. Children are to be enriched, not deprived.” Recalling a judge’s comments from early in her career, she adds, “Parents need to love their kids more than they dislike each other.”

The passion she has for keeping families intact should come as no surprise, considering how her own family embraces “la famiglia” as most important. Her Italian parents, Leo and Elide Fabbro, were proud of their roots but held their American citizenship in high esteem. Leo was a talented and sought-after tile contractor for 35 years who then worked in maintenance for a school district until his retirement. Keephart’s mother was a model mother and homemaker, then a seamstress who later earned degrees in teaching and nursing.

Keephart’s parents consistently impressed upon her and her brother, Leo A. Fabbro, M.D., the need to work hard but always to prioritize family. While Leo has passed, she keeps his family close and treasures carrying on traditions he held dear. Keephart always respected Bill’s mother, Lillian Keephart, who lived to the

age of 101. A kindergarten teacher, Lillian swam daily, played the piano, and taught dancing.

"Bill and I live across the street from the house where my parents lived, where I grew up," she says. "When my mother passed away 15 years ago, her home became 'Nonna's Cottage.' I keep this especially for Jonathan and his family. This is where they stay when they come to visit. It is like the family Airbnb. Mom knows they are there. I feel her presence."

Jonathan followed in his mother's footsteps by becoming an attorney. He graduated from The Lawrenceville School, Boston College, American University Washington College of Law, and the Mediation Program at Harvard. He lives in Virginia with his wife, Alexandra, and their three children, Atlas Henry, Bear Christian, and Kira Elide. (Elide was the name of Keephart's mother.) Ever since they moved to Virginia, Keephart has been visiting them, though she is able to do so less often because she facilitates the caregiving for Bill, whose diagnosis of Parkinson's disease 20 years ago advanced to total disability seven years ago. Bill remains at home.

Keephart continues to work full time. She credits PR&A Managing Partner John A. Hartmann III, who heads up the firm's Family Law department, for the ability to work as a team with her work family. Besides her work and the time she devotes to her family, Keephart fills her life with friends, philanthropy, and music. She and Bill have been members of the Capital Philharmonic of New Jersey's Board of Trustees since the orchestra's founding in the autumn of 2013. Keephart also works with The



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Lawrenceville School Mock Trial Program and collegiate competitions where her teaching and legal paths intersect. Keephart has traveled extensively and hopes to resume plans soon.

"I want to stay actively involved and continue to help people manage their challenges with dignity," she says. "Next month Bill and I will be married 52 years, which I like to say is not bad for a divorce attorney. I find endless joy in being a mother, and the most affectionate way of describing me is Nonna, a title that is so incredibly important to me.

"I also admire parents who truly parent," she continues, "even when there is no family unit, to ensure their children are healthy, secure, and confident. That is what defines a parent."

Standing Up

Whereas Keephart's route to becoming an attorney was circuitous, Sherri Warfel followed a much straighter path. In high school, she felt drawn to courses about civics and government, and she seemed to

always find herself advocating for friends who needed the support of someone they could trust.

Her legal career began shortly after graduating from Rutgers School of Law in 1998. Other than a brief period in which she worked for another firm, she has spent her entire career with PR&A.

"When I came here you could feel the spirit of people who came here before me," Warfel says of the firm, which was founded in 1929. "It has always fought for individual rights, and the commercial side of the practice represents unions. (Editor's note: The firm was once the state counsel for the AFLCIO.) The firm continues to fight and advocate for people. They have done that for years, and hopefully they will continue to do that after I'm gone."

Although she handles some medical malpractice cases, Warfel focuses almost exclusively on finding justice for individuals and families affected by nursing home abuse and neglect.

"As we get older, many of us will develop some kind of sickness or illness and have to be admitted to a nursing home," she says. "My clients have to have the bravery to call me in order to get started. Most of my cases involve older people who have lived wonderful lives and are now being mistreated by someone who is supposed to take care of them, but sometimes I'm representing younger people who [end up in nursing home because of] horrible injuries.

"No matter who they are," she continues, "I want to fight for them and make a difference."

Warfel credits her parents for teaching her vital lessons that would shape her life: *Work hard, be kind, always try your best.* By following their lead, she became a strong, independent, and confident person who believed in herself at a young age.

She has tried to set a similar example for her sons, Paul Trevor and Drew Brian, both in their 20s and finishing up their education. Paul Trevor is studying mechanical engineering at New Jersey Institute of Technology, while Drew Brian is at The George Washington University with an eye toward law school.

"Being a mother, I think, has made me a better attorney," she says. "Kids also make you realize you are not the center. Being an attorney is part of my identity, so my kids obviously know what I do for a living. I want them to see that I stand up for people, and I hope that has made them proud of me. I also want them to have the confidence to go after what they want, and to realize that not everything will be easy."

Furthermore, she wants them to understand that some of life's most challenging opportunities—like being a parent—are often some of the best. ■

