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Putting Families First

Leslie Spoltore, a family law attorney with Obermayer Rebmann Maxwell & Hippel LLP, is passionate about helping others, both in and out of the courtroom.

by **JULIE SHANNON** *photography by* **JEFF ANDERSON**

With the holidays just around the corner, many people are starting to think of upcoming get-togethers with family, decorating the house and the aroma of baked goods filling the air. While the holidays tend to be a time for joy, this time of year conjures feelings of a much darker nature for couples who are contemplating divorce.

“Most family law attorneys would tell you they see a spike in divorce work following the holidays and after summer vacation right around the time the new school year begins,” says Leslie B. Spoltore, a family law attorney who became a partner in Obemayer Rebmann Maxwell & Hippel LLP in September.

Spoltore, who has been practicing family law for 20 years, knew from a young age she wanted to be a lawyer. She remains passionate about helping those who are going through difficult times, especially during the holiday season. She is also enthusiastic about giving back to the community, spending her free time volunteering for local organizations and helping those who may not have the resources they need.

When we spoke with Spoltore, she told us why she’s passionate about family law and volunteering, why interest in divorce tends to spike after the winter holidays, and how she instructs clients to navigate the complex issues that often arise after one spouse tells another, “We need to talk.”

What do you love most about practicing family law?

Whether it is divorce, custody, or guardianship case, what happens in Delaware’s Family Court is important. For some families, these cases represent times of uncertainty and change. Although the court case will end, the family relationships and ties can continue and I think it is important to keep that in mind. I love having the opportunity to help my clients navigate that process, and I try to do it in a positive way.

Why do more couples separate or file for divorce following the holidays?

A recent study by University of Washington Associate sociology Prof. Julie Brines and doctoral candidate Brian Serafini bears out

what I have noticed in my practice—there are patterns in the timing of filing for divorce. For example, I see an increase in the number of divorces following the holidays. The holiday season can represent hope and optimism. That optimism can keep some families together hoping for the storybook ending. However, for many people, when the holidays are over and they see that the concerns of the past year are still there, their New Year’s resolution is to file for divorce.

What are some of the potential issues regarding custody for either spouse that can arise during the holiday season?

When parents do not reside together, the holiday season can bring additional tension and stress. For some families, disputes can arise over the contact or visitation schedule during the holiday season. This can be particularly true if holiday plans involve travel. Other potential issues can arise regarding holiday gifts. Sometimes the disputes focus on who bought the “it” gift that year for their child. Or, a dispute may relate to whether a particular gift is appropriate for their child. In other families, issues may arise with regard to the number or expenses of the gifts, with one parent feeling that the other is trying to buy a child’s affection.

Having an order that says which parent gets to spend this holiday with their kids on certain days sounds easier said than done. How do you help couples get through this?

Planning and perspective are invaluable during the holiday season. If parents have a contact order, they should review it sooner rather than later to make sure they understand the terms. Whether there is an order

in place or not, it is helpful to work on a holiday plan early. That way if either, or both, parents want or need to make special arrangements that conversation can take place sooner rather than later.

Another key is perspective. The holiday season is magical for children so it can be helpful to focus on the positive and on their fun. For example, rather than focusing on what isn’t possible under a holiday schedule, focus on the positive. It can be a great time to choose and start new traditions that make the holiday season special.

When is a good time for parents to sit down with their children? Also, do you suggest they look into counseling, if needed?

Counseling can be invaluable as much for the parents as it is for the child. It can be hard for parents to know when and how to talk with their children about something as difficult as divorce. If parents are speaking with a counselor ahead of time, the counselor can help parents structure the conversation and determine how open to be with their child. The conversation should be different depending on the age and maturity of the child. And, the counselor can help parents to make sure they are emotionally prepared for the conversation so they are in a better position to focus on their child’s needs.

You make a point of giving back to the community. You have volunteered your time at numerous organizations, including the Delaware Volunteer Legal Services, Delaware’s Office of the Child Advocate and the Delaware Futures High School Mock Trial Team. Why is giving back so important to you?

I really enjoy volunteering. As I mentioned before, what I love most about family law is the opportunity to help children and families, and that includes families that may not be able to afford legal representation. Volunteering through these organizations gives me the opportunity to help those in need, by doing something I am incredibly passionate about. And, volunteering to work with youth in Delaware, like the students in Delaware Futures, is always fun! ■



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