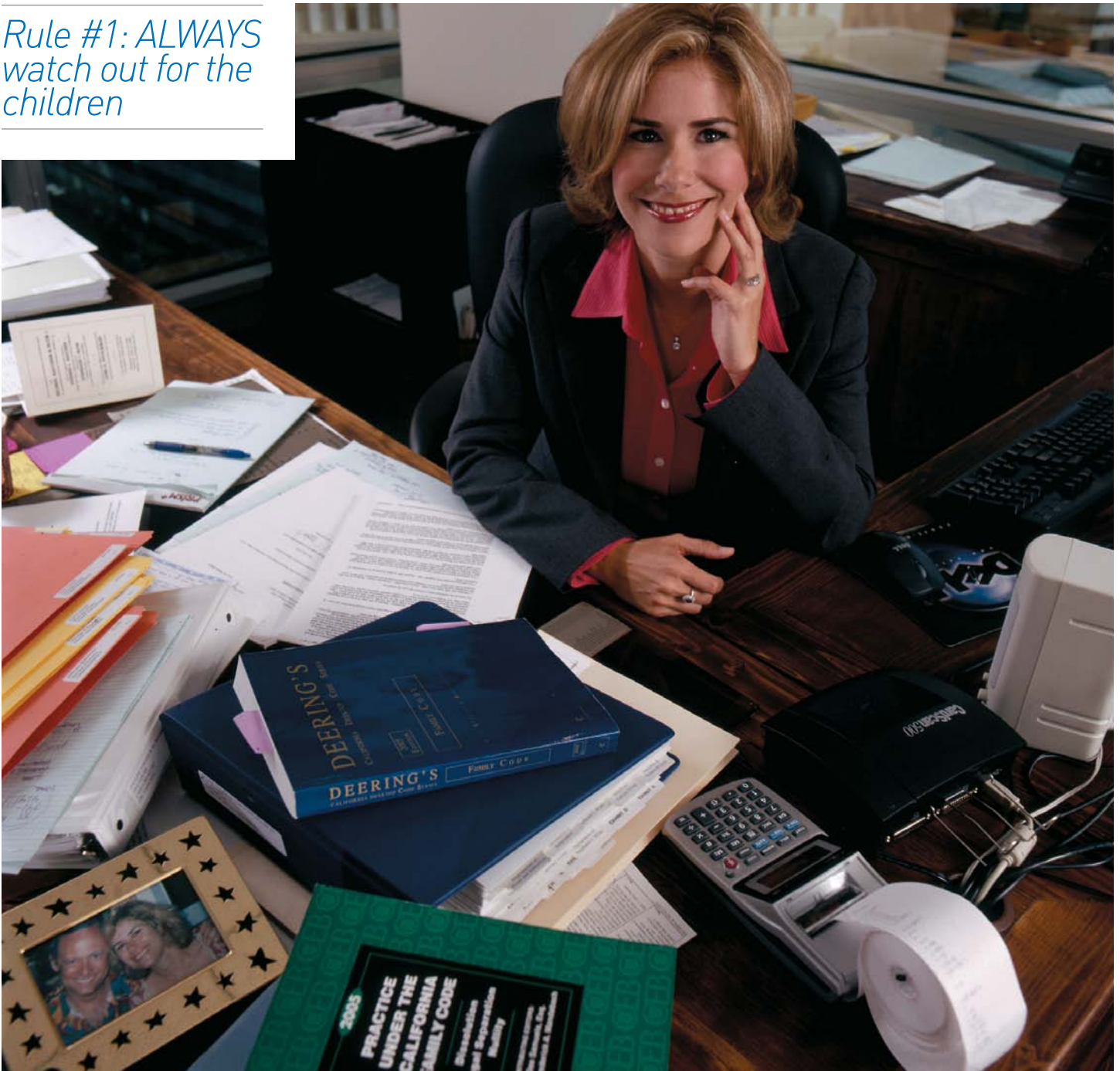


Stephanie Does Divorce

Rule #1: ALWAYS watch out for the children



So the other day my wife and I got into a bit of a tiff. We worked everything out, but a few days later she came into my office and saw a book called *Divorce and Finances* and a form from our broker. An empty feeling crawled through her body.

Then she remembered I was writing a profile about attorney Stephanie Blum, and the feeling lifted. Later in the day she told me the story and we shared a laugh.

It's a good thing, too, because if I needed a divorce attorney and hired Stephanie Blum, my wife might be in big, big trouble.

"She has people skills," says retired Judge Isabel Cohen, who for the

past several years has been involved in family law dispute resolution. "And along with being smart, knowing the law and working hard, that's 99 percent of it."

I meet Blum in her office on the 10th floor of a relatively new building in Westwood, a corner office facing south, toward Wilshire, and west, toward the beach. Blum wears a chic brown suit with pink trim, a diamond necklace and a shiny new engagement ring.

BY PAUL TULLIS

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT PACHECO

It is four weeks after Passover, and when Blum's family — including grandparents, great-aunts and -uncles, and all assembled in Florida — gets to the part about “why is this night different from all others,” her boyfriend of four years, attorney Tim Reuben, has an addendum outside the normal parameters of the ritual: He proposes. “Everybody went bananas,” Blum recalls.

Reuben is the Reuben in Reuben, Raucher & Blum, whose firm has specialized in complex civil litigation. When things went sour for Blum at her prior firm, Reuben saw a window of opportunity and brought his girlfriend of four years to the firm to initiate a family law practice.

“It's great for me,” Blum testifies, “because I often have peripheral issues in my cases, and I can just go down the hall for help.” She recalls that within weeks of starting at her new firm in January 2005, “we had a decision that was just dead wrong on the law, and we were able to file a hot writ because we do appellate work.”

Blum began her academic career at Cornell. Arriving from her

Judge Cohen recalls watching Blum mediating custody disputes and “several times, when I didn't think there was a snowball's chance in hell that a case would settle, I have seen her bridge the gap.”

An attorney who has worked on the other side of Blum on custody cases, Melanie Mandles, of Wasser, Cooperman & Carter, describes how Blum managed this task in one instance in particular.

“She had a difficult client, who was very angry at the outset,” recalls Mandles, “and wanted to take some very unreasonable positions. Stephanie was able to bring her client back to reality, essentially, and we worked out an agreement that allowed the parties to maintain their relationship for the sake of their children. And that is what being a family lawyer is all about.”

Blum — herself the child of divorce, and about to become a stepmother — concurs. “I don't think that children should be used as a weapon, and I counsel clients accordingly,” she says.

Ruth Estep of Oyler & Woldman — who has 25 years of experience practicing law, the last seven in family law, concurs with

“I seem constantly to be up against a kind of old-guard lawyer who can become very contentious. There are lawyers in town who are just over the top, and they think younger lawyers should just bow to them — especially younger female lawyers. But I suggest amicable resolutions. I suggest people work together for the sake of the children.”

childhood home in Long Island, she enrolled in human ecology, but she decided to transfer into the university's acclaimed hotel administration school. She spent a few years selling wine upon graduation. After she was involved in a nasty labor dispute, Blum became determined to find a way to work for herself; a long-standing interest in the law led her to USC Law Center in 1991.

Family law was always Blum's pursuit within the profession, and she became a certified specialist in 2003. “I'm constantly going to continuing education seminars,” she says. “I can't believe how many credits I have.”

Blum will do pre-nups and post-nups, but she doesn't favor the work, and she doesn't seek it out. What she most prefers to do is to work out contentious settlements favorably for her clients, seeking to “inject some rational calm into the settlement,” as she puts it. When custody battles are necessary, she tries to bring the parties together in such a way that does the least possible damage to the children. Two qualities make her especially good at this work: her ability to persuade a client not to walk down the wrong path — usually out of spite toward the opposing party — and her placing children's needs above even those which her clients sometimes initially prioritize.

Mandles. “I had to tell [Blum] something I thought her client was doing that was going to have a negative impact on the children,” Estep says. “Rather than slinging back at me, which is what many lawyers would have done, she immediately contacted the client and made sure it wouldn't happen.”

Blum's success also seems to hang on her skill at being simultaneously tough and nice. “She was very aggressive in fighting for her client, and very civil in dealing with me,” says Estep. “That's kind of a rarity.” Mandles pays Blum a similar compliment: “She's very aggressive, but very fair.”

“For some reason,” says Blum, “I seem constantly to be up against a kind of old-guard older lawyer who can become very contentious. There are lawyers in this town who are just over the top, and they think younger lawyers should just bow to them — especially younger female lawyers. But I suggest amicable resolutions. I suggest people work together for the sake of the children.”

At the end of the day, Blum says, she hopes for “a result that makes the client relatively happy. Sometimes in family law that's the best you can hope for.”

Fortunately, I don't need a divorce attorney, but if I did, I'd want Stephanie Blum. ❖