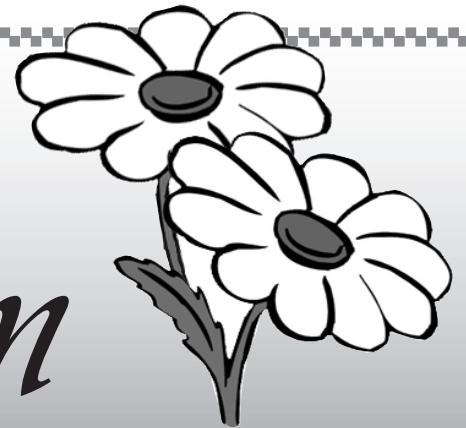
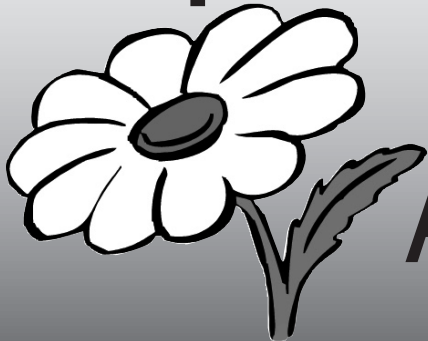




by Stephanie Fraiman

Special Needs Mom Advocates for Community



Adrienne Arkontaky assists families in planning for their children's futures.

Each morning Adrienne Arkontaky wakes up at 6:30am, feeds her daughter Jordan and waits for the wheelchair-accessible school bus that takes Jordan to a special needs school. Once her daughter is on the bus, Arkontaky feeds her other two children, gets them off to school and rushes out the door to the law firm of Littman Krooks LLP, where she practices as a special needs planning attorney.

Arkontaky admits that it's not easy balancing work and family, but her story is a testament to determination, pursuing a dream and helping others.

Arkontaky's middle daughter, 14-year-old Jordan, was born with cerebral palsy, mental retardation, cortical blindness and a seizure disorder. Jordan's disabilities have given Arkontaky first-hand knowledge of the importance of seeking out assistance for the care of children with disabilities.

"Jordan always needed a lot of advocacy," Arkontaky says. "When she was little she needed a wheelchair, but our insurance company wouldn't pay for it. I read through the insurance contract and found a way to obtain coverage."

After lobbying her insurance company and winning coverage, Arkontaky realized that her efforts were about more than just helping her daughter—they were a calling. She began attending law school in the evenings at Pace University in 1999, while taking care of her family and working part-time as a service coordinator and then a law clerk.

Arkontaky lives in Westchester with her husband, Peter, Jordan and two other daughters, Justine, age 17, and Jenna, age 8. "It definitely was not easy," Arkontaky recalls. "In fact, there were many times when I thought I would give up, but my family and friends supported me when things became overwhelming. It is impossible to do something like this without a strong support network. You must learn to lean on friends and be a good friend in return."

Upon graduating from law school in 2003, Arkontaky began working for a major law firm on several pro bono projects, advocating for insurance coverage for cancer patients. "That position helped me realize that I really wanted to help families who were faced with the challenges of raising children with disabilities," she says.

In 2004, Arkontaky responded to a job posting for a firm dedicated to special needs planning. Today she is an attorney at Littman Krooks, a firm specializing in special needs planning, special education advocacy, guardianship, estate planning and Medicaid issues, among other things, for families of children with disabilities, as well as elder law.

"Once I started work, I realized how many families are unaware of the many planning tools available for children with special needs," Arkontaky says. "For anyone who has a child with special needs, the biggest fear is what will happen when the primary caregiver is gone. I am extremely fortunate to be able to assist families working through these issues."

Fortunate to work for someone who appreciates the importance of this field, Ar-

kontaky was encouraged to look for opportunities to develop this practice area for the firm. "Adrienne is an asset to the firm," says Bernard Krooks, founding partner of Littman Krooks. "She works hard to help families plan for their children's futures. As a parent of a child with special needs, she can appreciate the difficulties that the families face on an everyday basis. The firm supports her efforts and we are proud of the fact that we can help so many families through her work."

As part of this focus, the firm now helps families develop a comprehensive care plan. The plan includes special needs planning, special education advocacy, guardianship and guidance for parents who don't know where to turn for help.

"It is important for parents to seek out the help that is available to them," Arkontaky says. "In Westchester, there are many programs available to help parents. We have the best services around."

When looking for guidance, Arkontaky suggests that families talk to other parents of children with disabilities. She also recommends reaching out to organizations such as the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, local school districts, physicians and advocacy groups dedicated to serving those with disabilities. In Westchester, organizations such as Heartsong, Northeast and Westchester ARC provide recreational and vocational support for persons with special needs. The Internet is a great resource, where families can locate a great deal of information to help them obtain whatever services they need.

However, Adrienne is first and foremost a mother, and her first priority is always her family's needs. She believes that in order to have a successful career and address the challenges faced by families, especially issues that relate to raising a child with special needs, you need to find a position that allows you the flexibility to be there for your family when you're needed.

"It may be difficult at times and there will be inherent obstacles, but you need to let some things go and know in your heart that you are doing the right thing," Arkontaky says. "In the end, it will all work out."

Adrienne considers her oldest daughter one of her top role models. "Justine gave up a summer to watch her sisters while I studied for the Bar exam," the proud Mom reflects. "She attended school parties for my youngest daughter, Jenna, when I could not be there, and she sat by my side through one of Jordan's eight surgeries. What other teenager do you know would do those things?"

The other person Arkontaky looks to for constant support is her husband. When she approached him about going to law school, he was extremely supportive and told her to be a lawyer. "He gave up four years of his life to support my dream," Arkontaky says. "It was far from easy, but he never once complained."

Arkontaky recommends that parents do what they believe in their hearts to be right for their children. "When I was in college, I never thought I'd be a lawyer, but you must embrace what life gives you."

Stephanie Fraiman works at Kellen Communications.