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## **When Special Needs Lead the Way**

Many people would be hard-pressed to juggle a busy law career while raising three daughters. When one daughter is severely physically challenged, the task might seem overwhelming. Not so for Adrienne Arkontaky, a White Plains-based lawyer with the firm of Steven M. Ratner, P.C. Arkontaky admits that it's not easy, but her story is a testament to determination and overcoming obstacles and ultimately, through her career, to helping others.

Arkontaky's 13-year-old middle daughter, Jordan, who now attends Pinesbridge BOCES in Yorktown, was born with cerebral palsy. She also is afflicted with mental retardation and cortical blindness. This situation has given Arkontaky first-hand knowledge of the importance of receiving proper assistance for the appropriate medical and financial care of children with disabilities. This led her into her current role as an attorney specializing in estate planning and Medicaid issues, among other things, for families of children with disabilities, as well as elder law.

Arkontaky, who lives in Hawthorne with husband Peter, Jordan and two other daughters, Justine, 16, and Jenna, 7, says, "I had to really advocate for Jordan in terms of insurance and getting the proper equipment for her. Consequently, everyone was saying to me that I should become a lawyer. Actually, after Jenna, my youngest, was born, I had been thinking of it. And, my husband encouraged me, too." She adds, "I absolutely would not be an attorney if not for Jordan."

"I had to work law school around caring for my kids, and to set realistic goals. I didn't want to miss them growing up," she says. Arkontaky started her law studies at Pace in White Plains in 1999. "I almost gave up," she recalls, citing the challenges that balancing studies and home presented. "My daughter, Justine, said to me, 'Mom, you will do this.' She was very helpful in Jenna's care at this time, too."

Arkontaky also relied on a good friend, Mary Anne Carey, to help watch Jenna during her law school days. "When a crisis arose, which it did routinely, Mary Anne's favorite saying was, 'OK, how are we going to get through this?'" she says. After graduating, Arkontaky took a job at a large law firm as the pro bono coordinator for their insurance and financial products group. "That position helped me realize that I really wanted to help families who were faced with the challenges of raising children with disabilities."

This past January, Arkontaky joined her present firm. "The principal of my firm, Steven Ratner, is very flexible in terms of my schedule," she says, explaining that she is able to work at home from time to time. "This allows me to have a fulfilling career and attend to my family's needs."

Before Arkontaky joined, the practice centered on legal issues facing the elder population, such as Medicaid planning, Wills and Trusts and Probate issues. "Steven has embraced the idea of providing special needs planning to families who need assistance," she explains.

As part of this focus, the firm now helps families set up trusts for kids with disabilities to supplement state funds they may receive. "Parents of kids with disabilities need to look at long-term guardianship issues as well," says Arkontaky. "These children can also be eligible for state benefits, but you have to be careful that certain wills and trusts, for example, don't affect the state services they can get. So, our firm focuses on these types of issues that such families often face."

Arkontaky also finds time to reach out to the community by conducting seminars on special needs and estate planning for families. She has words of advice for women who are in a similar situation with a disabled child, and says they can apply to all working women with families. "It's important to find work that fits your schedule, and it's very important to set achievable goals," she says. "Opt for part-time work if you can. Things, of course, won't always be perfect, but that's OK. Also realize that even in the best of situations, things do not always work out the way you planned. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it. It's vital to develop a good support network and to be supportive to others in need. Have a plan A, a plan B, and maybe even a plan C!"

It's obvious that Adrienne is very proud of her daughters. "Having a child with a disability can tear you apart" or bring you closer. I think my girls have learned quite a bit from having a sister with special needs. Justine has developed a sense of empathy and compassion that never would've been possible without Jordan. Jenna is extremely proud of Jordan and is not afraid to explain her disabilities to other kids her age. She also learned to walk by pushing Jordan's wheelchair."

Above all, Arkontaky credits her family with being her strength and encouragement. "I could never, ever have finished law school without their help," she says. "We have been through a lot together, and we understand how important it is to support each other in tough times."