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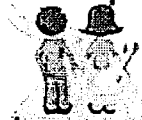
WHEN SPECIAL NEEDS LEAD THE WAY One mother's rise to the challenge

Chris Chagaris
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Many people would be hard-pressed to juggle a busy law career while raising daughters. When one daughter is severely physically challenged, the task may 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 Pinesbri BOCES in Yorktown, was born with cerebral palsy. She also is afflicted with 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 firm in White Plains in 1999. "I almost gave up," she recalls, citing the challenge of balancing studies and home responsibilities. "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 her during her law school days. "When a crisis arose, which it did routinely, Mary Anne saying was, 'OK, how are we going to get through this?'" she says. After graduation, Arkontaky took a job at a large law firm as the pro bono coordinator for the insurance and financial products group. "That position helped me realize that I 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 full-time career and attend to my family's needs."

Before Arkontaky joined, the practice centered on legal issues facing the elderly population, such as Medicaid planning, Wills and Trusts and Probate issues.

has embraced the idea of providing special needs planning to families who r 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 wit disabilities need to look at long-term guardianship issues as well," says Arkc "These children can also be eligible for state benefits, but you have to be ca certain wills and trusts, for example, don't affect the state services they can 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 sem special needs and estate planning for families. She has words of advice for v who are in a similar situation with a disabled child, and says they can apply working women with families. "It's important to find work that fits your sche and it's very important to set achievable goals," she says. "Opt for part-time you can. Things, of course, won't always be perfect, but that's OK. Also real even in the best of situations, things do not always work out the way you pl Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it. It's vital to develop a good network and to be supportive to others in need. Have a plan A, a plan B, an even a plan C!"

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

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



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