

# KAREN PINKERT-LIEB

## Balancing Tax and Psychology in Divorce Practice

by Amanda Robert

Karen Pinkert-Lieb always planned on becoming a psychiatrist. She studied psychology and biology at the University of Texas at Austin, but after she graduated and returned home to Chicago, she decided that she didn't want to delay her career six to eight more years while she completed her training.

she litigates and settles divorce cases that involve complex financial and custody issues, she says.

"Divorce law encompasses so many areas of discipline, such as corporate, tax, probate, and bankruptcy law," Pinkert-Lieb says. "A divorce practitioner must understand how to

going through one of the biggest crisis of their lives, to escort them through it as seamlessly as possible, it is really a rewarding career," she says.

### Family Matters

Pinkert-Lieb grew up in Chicago's northern suburbs with her parents and her younger



Instead, she enrolled in the Chicago-Kent College of Law. She pursued not only her J.D. but also an LL.M. degree in taxation. The statutory, puzzle-like nature of tax law intrigued her and eventually steered her into family law.

Pinkert-Lieb, 44, joined **Schiller DuCanto & Fleck LLP** in 1990, and she became one of the firm's first female equity partners in January 2010. She constantly evolves as

analyze psychological evaluations of the parties, as well as real estate and business valuations. It is such a complex and interesting area of the law, probably more so than any other."

Her role as a divorce lawyer also fulfills her earlier desire to become a psychiatrist. She finds people fascinating, and she enjoys stepping in as their "knight in shining armor."

"To be able to help people when they're

brother, Adam. Her father, Stuart, worked as an investment counselor, and her mother, Bobbi, wrote for a newspaper.

She felt compelled to find a job at an early age and started working in retail sales when she was 14 years old. She graduated from high school in just three years to work full-time as an assistant manager at another retail store.

Pinkert-Lieb continued to work while taking classes at the University of Texas at Austin. After

she graduated in 1989 and started at the Chicago-Kent College of Law, she found her first job as a law clerk at Schiller DuCanto & Fleck.

At the time, she was dating Steven Lieb, a fellow law student whose father was a divorce judge. When she told Judge Philip S. Lieb about her interest in tax, he encouraged her to talk to David H. Hopkins, a well respected tax lawyer at Schiller DuCanto & Fleck, about studying the tax aspect of divorce.

Pinkert-Lieb clerked with the firm during all three years of law school. She graduated with honors in 1993, and she married Steven Lieb two weeks after she took the bar.

She applied for an associate position at Schiller DuCanto & Fleck, since the practice encompassed aspects of taxation and psychology. It also appealed to her strength in the courtroom, she says.

"The synthesis of my background in the financial and psychological arenas, together with my aptitude in trial advocacy, made me a perfect candidate to practice family law," she says.

Pinkert-Lieb also brought her own insight into the practice. Her parents divorced when she was 18 years old, and she watched as they moved on and found happiness in other relationships, she says.

"Although people feel that it is the lowest point in their life, and it just may be, I know what's on the other side from personal experience," she says.

As a young associate, she received a lot of hands-on responsibility and worked closely with top-tier partners like Donald C. Schiller. The "brilliant strategist" taught her how to think outside the box and helped her build the foundation for the lawyer she is today, she says.

Schiller met Pinkert-Lieb when she started as a law clerk and weighed in on the decision to hire her into the firm. He knew she had great potential, because she was bright, eager and never complained about her assignments, he says.

"From most of our law clerks, we would get excuses that their workload at school was interfering with their duties at the office," Schiller says. "Never Karen—Karen had boundless energy."

He worked alongside Pinkert-Lieb in one of the longest trials in Cook County history. She second-chaired him in the trial and showed both determination and a mastery of the facts in the case, he says.

"I depended heavily on her, because it was extremely complicated," Schiller says. "She had her fingers on everything and could come up with whatever we needed, whenever we needed it."

Pinkert-Lieb has added to the quality of Schiller DuCanto & Fleck as not only an outstanding lawyer, but also as an outstanding example to those who joined the firm after her, Schiller says. She worked her way up from associate to equity partner, mentored other attorneys as she was mentored, and attracted a large numbers of clients to the firm, he says.

In particular, Schiller points to Pinkert-Lieb's compassion for clients as the factor that sets her apart from others in the profession.



14 of the 41 lawyers from Schiller DuCanto & Fleck LLP who have been named into *Best Lawyers of America*.

"Clients generally come to her because they know how dedicated she is," Schiller says. "Some lawyers complain about talking to clients, or the clients bother them too much. Karen gives them all the time they need."

"For someone who is having difficulty, she's a very comforting person," he says. "She can sort through a lot of the unnecessary facts and details and get to the heart of things."

#### Close Contact

Pinkert-Lieb often represents professional women, as well as many lawyers who have been referred to her from former clients or other lawyers, in divorce cases. She understands the unique issues that confront both sets of clients and offers the experience required to handle their cases, she says.

Pinkert-Lieb recently handled a financial case for one professional woman whose husband had given her his farm equipment business. At the time of the transfer, the business was worthless. But at the time of their divorce, it was worth many millions of dollars due to the efforts of her client, she says.

Her client claimed that her husband had given her the business during the marriage, because she caught him engaging in marital misconduct and threatened to leave him. The husband claimed that he had given her the business because he was having open-heart

surgery and wanted to keep his health problems from interfering with its daily operations.

"The company was named after him, and all of a sudden, she is divorcing him, and she is going to be taking the company that he started," Pinkert-Lieb says. "The judge's sympathies could have been with him. But the law was on our side."

In the two-year case, Pinkert-Lieb called on witnesses who corroborated her client's story. She succeeded in showing that the business

was given as a gift, and she received a favorable settlement to her client.

Her client, Cheryl Baber, interviewed lawyers in many top law firms before choosing Pinkert-Lieb to represent her in the case. Most of them exuded the attitude that they had seen or heard it all, she says.

"I had a very unique case, and other people weren't listening," Baber says. "Karen did. I realized she would pay attention to all of the complexities of the case."

"She was very supportive, very empathetic, and available by phone 24/7. I never had to worry that I would be in the middle of a situation and wouldn't be able to get a hold of her."

Baber knew many other older women who divorced after 20 or 30 years of marriage. Most of them wanted to avoid the stress of fighting and allowed their husbands to leave with more than their fair share, she says.

"I didn't want to do that—I just wanted what I had coming to me," Baber says. "Karen was very supportive of that position because she's an equally strong woman. I didn't feel as if I was battling the whole process by myself. She took some of the hits."

Pinkert-Lieb acted as Baber's advocate, but she also became her friend and pillar of support.

"She's super smart, so you feel totally confident in what she's telling you," Baber

says. “She knows the law but also what it’s like in the real world. The fact that she has a tax law background was also helpful.

“I could afford to hire anyone, but I really wouldn’t want to hire anyone else but her,” she says.

Pinkert-Lieb grew close to Baber, as she grows close to many of her clients during their divorces. She acts as their lawyer, social worker, and coach during the process, and she continues to offer them advice and support after she resolves their cases. But, she says, she finds it difficult for them to remain social friends.

“I remind them of a time in their life that they want to get past,” Pinkert-Lieb says. “It’s always hard to say goodbye, because you live through the experience together.”

“But, I love hearing the success stories. I am so happy when my clients get in touch with me and tell me they’re getting remarried, or that their child just graduated college. It’s one of the best parts of the job.”

## Learning Out Loud

Pinkert-Lieb has learned many lessons in the past 20 years that help her in her practice as a family law attorney.

She takes a holistic approach to serving her clients, finding it important to protect their legal rights while also considering their emotional needs. Her clients’ priorities become her priorities, she says.

“I always ask people when they walk in the door, ‘In a perfect world, what would be the best possible outcome for you?’” she says.

Some of her clients place peace as their top priority. While she often believes she could

push forward in court and get them more, she follows their lead and works to quickly resolve their case, she says.

Pinkert-Lieb starts planning and strategizing from the minute she meets her new clients. She thinks not just about her next step, but her next three steps, she says. She also understands the importance of communicating those moves to clients.

“Although this is old hat to me, it is new to them,” she says. “They don’t understand legalese. It can be a confusing and upsetting process, so it’s important to make sure my clients are both educated and empowered.”

She also works to become a resource for her clients. When they leave her office, she connects them with professionals who can assist them with their post-divorce needs, such as health insurance, estate planning, investment planning, and life insurance. She hopes to make their transition from married to formerly-married as seamless as possible, she says.

Sandra R. Murphy, a partner in the Chicago office of McDermott Will & Emery LLP, began practicing as a family law attorney in 1978. She first met Pinkert-Lieb when she was an associate and on the opposing side in a divorce case.

“She was honest, effective, and tough,” she says. “She told me she didn’t fall off the turnip truck yesterday.”

Over the years, Murphy continued to work against Pinkert-Lieb in divorce cases. She watched as she matured, becoming resolution-oriented but ready for litigation if it was warranted, she says.

“Some lawyers are a quick study,” Murphy says. “They can listen to the circumstances and identify issues relatively quickly to begin sculpting resolution or litigation tactics. All good lawyers are able to do that—she does that.

“She’s also just a nice human being, which is something to say about an opponent in our business.”

## Time Out

Pinkert-Lieb finds it challenging to keep her cases from engulfing her home life. She finds that many family law attorneys face the same challenge, since clients involved in divorce often need their lawyers in the evenings and on the weekends.

“Your clients are in crisis, and it can cause everything else to recede,” she says. “I have to force myself to leave it at the office.”

Pinkert-Lieb realizes that there aren’t enough hours in her day, so she limits the number of clients she represents at one time. She chooses the cases that are right for her, and she refers the others to competent, qualified attorneys, she says.

She also strives to compartmentalize, she says. She focuses on her clients while at work and her family while at home.

“It’s drawing that line between when I’m available and when I say, ‘This time is for my family,’” she says.

Pinkert-Lieb and her husband, who now serves as general counsel for the Midwest division of DaVita Inc., a publicly-traded dialysis company, live in Lincoln Park with their two daughters, Jessica, 10, and Danielle, 7.

She enforces a no-Blackberry rule for herself and her husband during family time, and she plans to enforce the same rule on her daughters when they get older. Her children also express an interest in their parents’ profession, and they put on trials when they have a disagreement.

“Instead of fighting it out, we make them put on their case,” Pinkert-Lieb says. “They have to do their opening statement; they have to put each other on as witnesses. My husband is the trial judge, but I’m the court of appeals. I have the last word.”

“It teaches them how to break down their arguments logically and to learn that what’s fair to one person is not necessarily what the rules dictate,” she says. “That’s how life works. They enjoy it, and they’re good at it.”

Pinkert-Lieb and her family spend many of their weekends with her brother, his wife, Michelle, and their two kids, Lilly, 4, and Joey, 8. They enjoy boating and water skiing on the Chain of Lakes and spending quality time as a family. ■



Pinkert-Lieb with her family: Danielle, age 7, Steven, and Jessica, age 10.

# TOP TEN WOMEN DIVORCE

Leading Women Divorce Lawyers in Illinois  
Based Upon the Surveys Conducted by  
Leading Lawyers Network

## 1 **KAREN PINKERT-LIEB** Schiller DuCanto & Fleck LLP, Chicago

2 **Sandra R. Murphy**  
McDermott Will & Emery LLP  
Chicago

3 **Dorene Marcus**  
DAVIS FRIEDMAN  
Chicago

4 **Doris Schumacher McMorrow**  
DAVIS FRIEDMAN  
Chicago

5 **Mary J. Clark**  
Berger Schatz  
Chicago

6 **Joy M. Feinberg**  
Feinberg & Barry PC  
Chicago

7 **Carroll A. Barry**  
Feinberg & Barry PC  
Chicago

8 **Eunice Ward**  
Nottage and Ward  
Chicago

9 **Anita M. Ventrelli**  
Schiller DuCanto & Fleck LLP  
Chicago

10 **Jacalyn Birnbaum**  
Nadler Prtkin & Mirabelli LLC  
Chicago

**Out of more than 86,000 lawyers licensed to practice law in Illinois, Karen's peers honored her with these recognitions:**

- *Ranked in the TOP TEN Women Consumer Lawyers*
- *Ranked #1 Woman Divorce Lawyer*
- *Ranked in the TOP 100 Women Lawyers in Any Area of Practice*

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