

JOURNALIST. ATTORNEY. SHE'S BOTH.

PAM SAKOWICZ MENAKER HAS CHANGED HOW CHICAGO COVERS LEGAL NEWS.

For her job application for leading Chicago personal injury firm, Clifford Law Offices, Pam Sakowicz Menaker (BSJ75, MSJ76) wrote an 80-page pre-trial brief.

She didn't get the job. But Robert A. Clifford offered her something else.

Clifford wanted to tap her extensive journalistic and legal experience so that his firm could better navigate the media surrounding its many high-profile cases. Menaker has two degrees from Medill and a JD from Loyola Law School, had written for political speakers for the U.S. Dept. of Justice, served as a Washington correspondent, wrote political commentary for the Chicago Tribune suburban sections and worked as a writer and producer for ABC-TV Chicago.

In 1991, positions like the one Clifford was proposing didn't exist, so he asked Menaker to come up with her own job title. She accepted his offer and in 1999 became the firm's communications partner, and would go on to prove in her 23-year tenure how valuable the role is to both the firm and its clients.

From the moment a client files a case with the firm to the moment it's settled or a verdict is rendered, Menaker guides clients through what can be an overwhelming legal process. She conducts press conferences, fields legal questions and advises clients on dealing with the media.

"As a journalist, I always know what the journalists will want. I know exactly what questions they will ask, what the story is, what the lead is," says Menaker.

Often handling high-profile cases, such as the 2002 scaffolding collapse at the John Hancock Center and the 2003 Chicago porch collapse that killed 13 and injured dozens, Menaker coaches clients through the stress of intense media exposure.

"Clients will tell me they feel like hostages within their homes," she says. But she does more than calm clients' nerves. She protects their cases.

Clifford Law Offices took on the case of Chicago native and internationally acclaimed violinist Rachel Barton, whom a Metra train had dragged 200 feet, severely injuring her legs. Menaker decided that Barton would never talk to the press about that day's events. The case, which took four years to go to trial, has since been called the most publicized civil trial in the history of Cook County. And during those front-page riddled years, every time Barton made a public appearance, Menaker was by her side, answering legal questions and telling the press that Barton would not be commenting on the incident.

"I love the First Amendment, and I feel that people do have a right to know what's going on," says Menaker. "But in Barton's case, it was too important that the case not be taken advantage of. The first time she talked about the events needed to be when she was on the stand."



The case resulted in a \$29.6 million verdict in Barton's favor that was upheld on appeal.

When she's not facing the public alongside clients, Menaker can be found in her Wilmette home. Since having kids (all of whom have Northwestern and/or Medill degrees, including daughter Michelle Menaker, also known as Chicago radio station B96's Showbiz Shelley), she has opted to work from home. There, she manages the press for individual clients and also maintains the law office's 5,000-page website, which she developed from scratch. She writes blogs for the site on a near-daily basis, covering company and legal news as well as providing legal resource information to the public.

Or, depending on the quarter, she's on Northwestern's campus. At her alma mater, she has taught writing to graduate students, assisted in teaching Law of Journalism to undergraduates, and most recently taught courses called Law, Ethics and Media and Consumer Law and Ethics of Marketing for Medill IMC.

"I never would have thought this is the way my career would turn out," Menaker says. "But I'm glad it did."

K. ALEISHA FETTERS FREELANCE WRITER AND EDITOR BASED IN CHICAGO.