



Terry Lyons: Putting family back into the law

THE INTERVIEW ISSUE

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Terry Lyons opened her own firm, Lyons & Associates, in 2004. - (PHOTOS BY AARON HOUSTON)

The waiting room of Lyons & Associates in Somerville looks and feels more like an inviting foyer of a home decorated for the holidays.

That is exactly how Theresa “Terry” Lyons wants it.

“When clients walk into our law firm, it should feel like home,” she said.

Same goes for Lyons’ employees, who on the particular day of her interview with NJBIZ, collectively exchanged humorous commentary regarding their managing partner’s choice of wardrobe.

“Everyone is making fun of my snowflake socks today,” she said. “Let me tell you something: Wonder Woman cufflinks and snowflake socks, that is what you’re getting from me.”

One should expect no less from one of the top matrimonial and family law attorneys in the state.

After earning her undergraduate degree from Montclair State University, Lyons was one of the first to graduate from a dual-degree program at Rutgers University, earning her law degree from Rutgers University Law School at Camden and her master's degree in social work at the New Brunswick campus in 2001.

She would go on to accept a judicial clerkship with the New Jersey Supreme Court and a position at the large law firm Drinker Biddle & Reath before starting her own firm in 2004.

Today, Lyons & Associates' practice areas range from the good — adoptions, for example — to the difficult, such as divorce, child abuse and domestic violence.

Last year, the many stories and experiences Lyons has collected over the years led her to author and publish a best-selling book, "Sticks and Stones: Life Lessons from a Lawyer," and her numerous blogs regarding United States law have earned her and her firm nearly 2,500 Facebook and over 8,500 Twitter followers.

Lyons & Associates also created the first free smartphone application of its kind to easily obtain information on divorce, calculate estimated child support, and be instantly connected to every single domestic violence shelter in the state of New Jersey.

Honored this year by the American Institute of Family Law Attorneys as one of the "Top 10 Best Female Attorneys" and named one of this year's Top 25 Leading Women Entrepreneurs in New Jersey, Lyons also is on the board of trustees of SAFE in Hunterdon and a foster and adoptive mother.

Still, when her interview ended with NJBIZ, she had just one question.

"I never end a conversation without asking what else I can do for that person," Lyons said.

NJBIZ: *Nearly three years after graduating from law school, you made the decision to become an entrepreneur. What inspired you to start your own boutique law firm so early?*

Theresa Lyons: I clerked for the New Jersey Supreme Court; I graduated law school with high honors; I was editor in chief of a law journal; I was working at Drinker Biddle & Reath, making loads of money, and was immediately put on a team that was national counsel to Johnson & Johnson. I was living the life that everyone thinks you are supposed to be living, working about 20 gazillion hours every day. ... On a random Tuesday night, I was sitting in my office, surrounded by books and papers, and this young woman my wife and I had mentored — who, to put it mildly, has had some adversity in her life — calls me. She is in her 30s today, and married, but when we met, my wife and I were 19 and she was 3 years old. She was a freshman in college at the time that she called me and, so, I thought there must have been something serious going on with her. She said, 'When I met you and Linda, you were in college. You were so poor that when you used to take me to Carvel, you used to make me choose between two scoops of ice cream or

one scoop plus sprinkles.’ I said, ‘OK, what’s your point? I’ve got a lot of work to do.’ She said, ‘I loved you then. What are you doing now?’ When I hung up the phone and I looked at the wealth and the potential power from the track that I was on, I thought, ‘Yeah — what the hell am I doing?’ That is when I decided I wanted to be an entrepreneur. Drinker Biddle & Reath supported me 1,000 percent. When I gave notice, they threw me a party, sent me some clients and gave me some furniture and all of these books. To their credit, I learned from what I consider to be some of the best brains on the planet. They are smart and passionate about everything that they do, and I am grateful for every lesson that they taught me.

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NJBIZ: *What do you believe makes Lyons & Associates successful?*

TL: Our motto is, we deliver personal attention for personal matters. People come to us in crisis: we are humans first and lawyers second. There is always a bin of toys here for kids. There is always beer in the fridge for our clients who have had a rough day in court. And there is no dress code here. Half of the time, you will see lawyers in sweatpants. It is all to achieve the best outcomes. When our clients come to us, they are at a fork in the road. Whether we are helping them with an adoption, which is a wonderful thing, or dealing with domestic violence — unless we get that person in the comfort of their own skin, they may choose the wrong way. Particularly in the work that we do, we have to remember that we encounter people at a certain time and place with their own set of truths. We can do our best to advocate for and to accompany them, but ultimately, it is their journey. All I can do is to try to be a reflection of their truth. I think having that understanding helps me sleep at night, and I think it helps the other person, too. Say, for example, a woman is faced with domestic violence. I am sure that person has had 100 people say, ‘You should leave him.’ That has not worked. If I validate her, and say, ‘Why is it hard to leave? Wow, that is a good reason. In addition to that good reason, have you thought about these other good reasons?’ that brings the power back to the client. ... We get very good results here. Divorce lawyers are a dime a dozen. People come here for counsel and compassion.

NJBIZ: *What was your reaction when you learned that you were named one of this year’s Top 25 Leading Women Entrepreneurs? What was that experience like?*

TL: I am most proud of being an entrepreneur and a job creator in the state of New Jersey. Lots of people have a job; not everybody can create a job. So, it was very rewarding. It was tremendous to be around so many smart, powerful entrepreneurs who also happen to be women. I live my life trying to surround myself with people who are smarter and more interesting than I am, and I find good things come from that. Do I think eventually I will get more business from it? Yes. Is it possible that I already have? Yes. But what is more rewarding for me was the experience of being around other ‘crazy brains.’ Let me tell you something, it takes a special, crazy brain to be able to see empty space and to take it and create it into wealth for yourself and for other people.

NJBIZ: *Your master’s degree is in social work. Is that typical of a matrimonial and family law attorney?*

TL: I have two words for you: Hell. No. Lawyers think too much and social workers feel too much. I look at the world in a different way. Whenever I am with lawyers, I feel like I am a social worker, and whenever I am with social workers, I feel like I am a lawyer. I never feel at home in my own mind. ... What I have seen, though, is a general shift in family law toward a more conciliatory tone. That is because there are 1.2 million married people in the state of New Jersey; if 50 percent get divorced, you're talking nearly 600,000 cases. And that's just divorces — only 50 percent of our cases are divorces. There are 19 different types of cases that happen in family courts, such as juvenile delinquencies, domestic violence cases, adoptions and more. ... What is interesting to me is how many matrimonial law firms have yet to make that shift, as divorces have always been their bread and butter. We get a lot of referrals from other matrimonial lawyers, in fact.

NJBIZ: *That partially explains the double-digit growth your firm experienced last year.*

TL: We are always growing. That is my long-term business dilemma. Right now, we have 13 employees — two male attorneys, four female attorneys and, currently, an all-female support staff. Do I want to stay here and start to become like other powerhouse firms with one office and 70 lawyers? Or, once I have 15 to 20 employees here, do I want to create a satellite office in South Jersey? I just knocked out some office space here for my next expansion and I am hoping to hire another lawyer in January or February. But, after that, I will have some decisions to make.

NJBIZ: *What do you look for in particular when you are hiring?*

TL: I would be lying if I told you talent is easy to find. I look more for personality characteristics than I do technical skillsets. We ask hard questions. For example, for our captain of first impressions, our receptionist, I might say, you pick up the phone and someone is literally bawling on the other side of the line. What do you say to them?



NJBIZ: *Aside from talent, what are some of the other benefits and drawbacks to being an entrepreneurial family law firm in New Jersey?*

TL: It is good to work within the New Jersey legal system, as it is one of the most highly respected in the country. Ours was the first Supreme Court in the United States to deal with issues of surrogacy, same-sex marriage, fair housing — in that regard, it is an honor to be part of a judicial and legal system that is seen as one of the leaders in the country. And, from a numbers game, there is enough business to go around. According to the Census Bureau, only 48 percent of all children in the U.S. live in a home that one would consider to be ‘traditional,’ meaning, with a mother and a father who are still married. That means that 52 percent of children under the age of 18 live in homes that are no longer considered ‘traditional’ — they are living in homes with single parents, with blended families, with same-sex couples, with grandparents, with adoptive families and more. It has been really scary, fun and an honor to be existing in this moment in human history, for good or for bad. When you combine that statistic with the innovation of technology, I feel like humans are going through the greatest evolution since Gutenberg invented the printing press.

NJBIZ: *You and your wife actually operate a “nontraditional” home, as foster and adoptive parents.*

TL: Yes. Two of our children have stayed and have been adopted and two have been reunified with their biological families. They keep me humble. They keep things in perspective for me. And they remind me of what is and isn’t important. ... All of our children are African-American, and it has been a tumultuous couple of years, with the election being just one piece of it, compounded with the Black Lives Matter movement. But my wife reminded me that, sometimes, storms are a good thing. Am I confident as to how things are going to turn out? Hell no. Do I think it is going to be one interesting ride? Yes. If you look at any great progress of humanity, it has usually come after some type of storm.

NJBIZ: *What motto or advice is it that you try to follow every day?*

TL: My motto is to be afraid big. I came to the conclusion a number of years ago, that I spend every day of my life afraid of something. Some of us lay awake at 2 a.m. wondering what we are going to do; for some of us, it might just be a fleeting thought in the middle of the afternoon when we are doing 100 different things. But every other human that I have ever encountered with that question has said, ‘Wow! I’m afraid every day, too!’ Given that universal truth, that I am forever condemned to spend every day of my life afraid, I will be afraid big. I won’t be afraid of a piece of paper sitting on my desk and I will not be afraid of yesterday’s mistakes.