

The Wisdom Corner: Interview With Celebrity Divorce Lawyer Harriet Newman Cohen

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When Oprah explained the origins of her Legend's Ball in 2005, she said: "I started thinking about all the women who'd come before me...women whose steps created a journey of no boundaries for my generation. I wanted to thank them, celebrate them, and rejoice in their spirit."

*It's in this vein that Oprah Daily presents **The Wisdom Corner**, a space for women over 65 to share the lessons they've learned throughout their incredible lifetimes so far. As they reflect on the gifts time has given them, we hope you'll take a moment to absorb their musings in this small—but wise—corner of the internet.*

Divorce lawyer Harriet Newman Cohen has started what she calls her "Third Life." And it all began with a brand new law firm, Cohen Stine Kapoor LLP, which she opened on New Year's Day of 2021 alongside her daughter, Martha Cohen Stine, and founding partner, Ankit Kapoor.

For Cohen, the pandemic—which saw a rapid increase in divorce throughout the earliest months of 2020—provided yet another opportunity for reinvention, a recurring theme throughout her life. Like many of us, Cohen and the rest of her team worked remotely for much of last year. But now she's fully vaccinated and moved into her new office in Times Square.

"When the pandemic hit and brick and mortar seemed to be an enemy, and people were thinking about, 'What's the new world going to look like?' I took that opportunity to recreate my firm and myself," she tells Oprah Daily. "I immediately learned all of the technology that I needed to. I taught myself how to host meetings on video, how to have breakout rooms, and intake from my clients on Zoom. It's revolutionized the world."



The same energy that inspired her to found a new law office in a world altered by COVID-19 goes back to what the attorney dubbed her "Second Life." Fresh off of her own divorce at age 38, she decided to attend law school as a single mother of four. Cohen is now one of the most respected matrimonial and family lawyers in New York. She was President of the New York Women's Bar Association and is regularly named to the state's annual top lawyers lists. *The New York Times* sites her expertise, and her high profile cases include representing Laurence Fishburne, Andrew Cuomo, Paul George, and Eve Chilton (Harvey Weinstein's first wife) in their respective divorces.

As the years have passed, she'd earned a reputation through a 40-plus year career that she is nowhere near ready to give up. "When I would walk into a room, there would be a hush," she says. "Harriet has arrived.' Then as I got a little older, I became 'Amazing Harriet.' Rather than being the unwanted person in the room—you know, 'The Old Lady'—it was, 'When is Harriet going to arrive?'"

We welcomed Cohen to "The Wisdom Corner" to learn how her ambition and passion for her work has carried her through life—and the pandemic

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What was it like entering law school in your late 30s?

In those days, women were supposed to be highly educated, be at home and raise very educated children, and feel completely fulfilled through their husbands and their children. So, I got a great education at Barnard College and a masters at Bryn Mawr College. I had four daughters right away within the first 10 years of my graduation. Then I realized that that wasn't going to be enough for me.

In 1971, 18 years later after Barnard, I entered law school because I felt I wanted to be able to have my own life when my children left the nest. I did very, very well. It was unusual for a person of my age to go to law school, but I think there's a lot more of that today. I was with people who graduated when they were 24, and I was 41. I seemed very old, but when I look back now, I was so young.

How do you feel about retiring?

Retirement for me would be an enemy because I have so much to offer. There was a theme in this country that people age 65, certainly by 75, would retire. They would live on their savings and do, I don't know, RV travel around the country? None of that ever was of interest to me. What was of interest to me was that every single day I was meeting new people: I have a huge client base, the judges, and the other lawyers.

The judges in the New York state system are required to retire at age 70. Age 70 these days is truly the new 50. In the United States Supreme Court, they can sit there until they're 110. There's no age that they have to retire by. I measure myself, and I analogize what I do to what *they* do. The reason that some of those older justices are so desirable is they know so much. They've come through so much. They're so dimensional, and the ones that they make retire in the state system, you are losing people with so much experience.

As a divorce lawyer for over 40 years, what is it like to see so many couples break up?

The field of divorce is not what it was years ago. It's not sending a detective to a hotel to see whether there's adultery being committed. It's partnership law, honestly.

For me, it's a very liberating thing. People after divorce, for the most part, are happier than before. Because nobody should live with someone who doesn't want to live with them, or who's betraying them, or who's hurting them. Children shouldn't live in a war zone. So I see my job as taking people to a better place by helping them understand that they don't want to be where they are now. They have to move on, they have to grow.

We've seen a change in how celebrities approach divorce. Like Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin's famous "conscious uncoupling."

It's evolving. We do have a little more parity, shall we say, in terms of the earnings. We have a lot more co-parenting than when I started. The 50s father came home at the end of a long day of work was served. Somebody put his slippers on for him, gave him his pipe. The kids were supposed to be seen, but not heard. That's not how your fathers are today.

"I don't think we change all that much. I think we take ourselves with us."

I see fathers who are just like mothers and mothers who were just like fathers, which changes the divorce. We're in a whole different world, which is exciting for me as an older person because I've lived through different regimes in my field.

What have you learned about yourself since you began your career?

I'm the same person as I was at age six. When I was a little girl in Providence, Rhode Island, there was a hurricane. I recall my mother saying to me, "You have the choice, Harriet. You can stay home, or you can go to school." I said, "I want to go to school."

The teacher and I were there alone. I was in kindergarten, and I'll never forget that day as long as I live. It was wonderful. I remember she was teaching me cursive penmanship at the time. I was a very hard worker then, and I'm a very, very hard worker now. I don't think we change all that much. I think we take ourselves with us.

How would you define wisdom?

Wisdom is a combination of experience, knowledge, applying research; being very honest about what you don't know, being willing to ask questions. But open-mindedness, and the ability to listen. Oh my God, that's the most important thing of all is to listen really hard to what another person is saying to you.

Do you believe you're wise?

I think I'm wise, but I think I have a lot to learn. I know what I *don't* know, and I don't know so much. I would not shoot from the hip.

What I've learned about myself is that I was very blessed. With enormously good education, very good health, a very good attitude, and the ability to absorb and to internalize everything that I learn so that when it came time to start the third life of Harriet Cohen -- not at age 41, but at age 70 and beyond -- I was ready for it.

