



Martha Cohen Stine of *'Cohen Stine Kapoor'*: 5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me When I First Became An Attorney



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Martha Cohen Stine, Prominent Matrimonial Lawyer, of Cohen Stine Kapoor LLP in New York City

Ask as many questions as it takes to gain a perfect understanding of what is being asked of you. If you don't know something, don't guess, look it up. Honestly assess the facts of your case. Know when to settle.

AS a part of my series about “5 things I wish someone told me when I first became an attorney” I had the pleasure of interviewing attorney Martha Cohen Stine of [Cohen Stine Kapoor LLP](#).

Martha Cohen Stine is a founding partner of [Cohen Stine Kapoor LLP](#) and has focused exclusively in the field of family law for more than 25 years. She spent the first ten years of her career as a commercial litigator with a large Manhattan law firm. Stine enjoys an AV Preeminent® 5.0 rating in Martindale and Hubbell and has been consistently listed as among New York City's top 50 female lawyers by SuperLawyers New York Metro. Stine is the current Chair of the New York County Lawyers (“NYCLA”) Matrimonial Law Section, sits on NYCLA's Board of Directors, and is the Chair of the NYCLA Foundation, the charitable arm of NYCLA. She is also on the Executive Committee of the Family Law Section of the New York State Bar Association. Stine

graduated cum laude from New York University and from the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, where she was an editor of the Law Review. www.csklawny.com

Thank you so much for joining us! Our readers would love to get to know you a bit more. What is the “backstory” that brought you to this particular career path in Law?

My training was at a large litigation firm, Shea & Gould. I was assigned to a family law matter assisting legendary trial lawyer Milton Gould. Our client was an older gentleman whose wife, an heiress, had been kidnapped by her relatives. The wife had dementia. The family wanted her to change her will. We commenced habeas corpus proceedings and the case went to trial. I loved the drama and intrigue and was good with the client. About ten years later, I joined my mother’s firm, and we’ve been practicing together for more than 25 years. My mother, Harriet Newman Cohen, and I, are considered top matrimonial lawyers in New York City. We have our own firm, Cohen Stine Kapoor LLP, located at 11 Times Square in Manhattan. We handle high profile cases and represent celebrities. Both of us are consistently listed as among New York’s top 50 female lawyers by Super Lawyers NY Metro.

Can you share the funniest or most interesting story that occurred to you in the course of your law career?

Almost all of my stories are interesting because family law is a fascinating field. I represented the former wife of a famous standup comic. His agreement with my client contained a confidentiality clause. He was not supposed to be publicly revealing anything about her or their divorce. But he was making fun of his ex in his standup routines. I sent him a cease and desist letter. We held a meeting at my office. We got nowhere. He told me nobody was going to tell him what he could or could not say in his performances. A few days later he was performing at Radio City Music Hall and I bought a front row seat. As the comic came on stage, there I was in the front row, with a big legal pad and pen on my lap. He saw me and caught my eye. I worried that I would end up in the material and the butt of some lawyer jokes. But not only did I not end up in the material, he didn't say a word about my client that night or ever again. Problem solved.

Another interesting story involved my client, a wealthy woman who had fallen madly in love with a handsome waiter who had nothing but debt and a sexy accent. He was a gold digger and everyone knew it except the client. Her family insisted on a prenup. If she and the waiter divorced in the first few years of the marriage, he would get nothing. They got married and went on their honeymoon. She called me as soon as she got home. Draw up the divorce papers, she said. It's over, I want a divorce. During the

honeymoon, he ate the entire mini-bar. He ate all the M&Ms, chocolate bars, nuts, wafers, cookies, sodas, wine, alcohol, everything. Well, at the time, New York was still a fault state. You needed grounds, like cruelty or abandonment. Was eating the mini-bar cruelty? Part of my job is to be creative. We figured it out. She was divorced within a month.

What are some of the most interesting or exciting projects you are working on now?

I'm very involved with my bar association, the New York County Lawyers Association, where I sit on the Board of Directors and am Chair of the NYCLA Foundation, the charitable arm of NYCLA. Fund-raising in a pandemic is quite a challenge, all events are now virtual. I'm also the Chair of the New York County Lawyers Association Matrimonial Law Section. The pandemic has brought about so many changes in our practice, it's a full-time job keeping up. There is new substantive law and new technology. Our practice now includes remote court appearances including virtual trials, virtual depositions, virtual client meetings, virtual settlement meetings, virtual marriages, virtual divorces. I have clients I've never met, other than through Zoom. Lawyers need to learn a vast amount of new technology. Exciting projects include trying to keep the bar association's pro bono and community based programs vibrant and meaningful under remote conditions, forming a new law firm during the pandemic where we have reduced our office space, and adapting our practice to the new normal.

What are some of the most interesting cases you have been involved in? Without sharing anything confidential can you share any stories?

I have cases where temporary stays in other states have turned into permanent arrangements, often to the dismay of one of the spouses. Once a child has resided in another state for more than six months, the new state becomes the home state. I have one case where the client moved with his wife and kids into his mother in law 's house in Miami for what was supposed to be a temporary stay. But the months dragged on, and soon the six-month mark came and went. The wife and the husband were not getting along, the wife and her mother ganged up on my client and threw him out of the house. If it had been his own house, he would have had some rights. But it was his mother in law's house, and she had the right to throw him out. I have another case where the client is a performer who has not worked in ten months. He needs a downward modification of support. I represent a father where the child is being withheld by the mother who is using COVID as an excuse, claiming the father is not observing proper COVID protocols. I have cases where there was emotional abuse in the home, but hotels were closed and the abusive spouse had nowhere to go. The Court sectioned off the apartment and kept the spouses in different rooms.

Which people in history inspire you the most? Why?

Of recent history, Ruth Bader Ginsburg. She was a brilliant Jewish woman from Brooklyn, knew how to get along with colleagues who disagreed with her fundamental views, loved the opera and was not good in the kitchen. I sing with an opera company, I love the opera, I'm a Jewish woman and I'm not good in the kitchen. When I wish I was better in the kitchen, I think of RBG and feel a bit better. I also admire the suffragettes, who fought for women's right to vote in public elections. Last year marked the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment. We've only been voting for 100 years, that's one lifetime, not a long time.

What advice would you give to a young person considering a career in law?

I would encourage a young person to go for it, to apply to law school, I would tell the person that it's a fantastic career. A law degree opens a world of opportunity and flexibility. There are so many different fields a young lawyer can enter. There are jobs in law firms, corporations, the media, health care, insurance companies, the government, state and federal, entertainment, the criminal law system and more, the list is endless. Clearly, the world needs one more lawyer!

If you had the ability to make three reforms in our judicial/legal system, which three would you start with? Why?

Focusing on family law cases in New York, I would streamline the process for uncontested divorces and eliminate unnecessary paperwork, expand the automatic orders designed to maintain the financial status quo during the pendency of a divorce action, and eliminate the requirement for personal service of a summons for divorce. In these days where everything is remote, including marriages, divorces and funerals, I would think that a summons for divorce could be served via email or by overnight mail.

How have you used your success to bring goodness to the world?

I'm honest with my clients and don't always tell them what they want to hear. I want their expectations to be realistic and I want them to understand the process, the price they may pay, whether it's financial or emotional, and to make informed choices. With that said, I stand beside, in front of, and behind each and every client throughout the entire process. I've had clients express appreciation in various ways. One woman, a mom, calls me every few months to tell me that I changed her life, that I taught her how to stand up for herself and that she loves me like family. Another client used to stop by my office every year, on the anniversary of her divorce, to leave me flowers and a note. Family law is a difficult field, the cases can be tough and the clients are stressed and in crisis. A matrimonial lawyer needs a thick skin. These expressions of gratitude, which reassure me that I have done some good, mean a lot to me.

I know this is not an easy job. What drives you?

I love the intellectual stimulation, I am always learning, always trying to improve, you're only as good as your last success. I'm good at strategy and I like to win. I love arguing my cases before smart judges, and taking on difficult adversaries. Family law is a roller coaster. I thrive on the pressure, the adrenalin and the excitement.

What are your “5 things I wish someone told me when I first started” and why. Please share a story or an example for each.

1. Ask as many questions as it takes to gain a perfect understanding of what is being asked of you. If you don't know something, don't guess, look it up. Honestly assess the facts of your case. Know when to settle.
2. Learn how to stand up to bullies, whether it's a colleague, the other side's attorney, your own client, or the judge. Practice and rehearse. Learn how to deal with uncooperative witnesses.
3. If you are defending a deposition, keep a cheat sheet of objections handy and a list of phrases to

use if the other attorney is out of line. Ask for a break if your client is out of control.

4. Don't allow the first settlement meeting to be scheduled at the other side's office. Location counts. If you are the defendant, understand that the other side may call your client as his or her first witness. Prepare with your client for the possibility that he or she will be testifying on the first day of trial.
5. Take time off from work to attend a trial advocacy course.

We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might see this. :-)

I'm a performer. I love musical theater, light opera and Gilbert & Sullivan. I'm obsessed with lyrics. When I'm learning a new song, I honor the lyric, it's not okay to tweak a word or make even a small change. Sing exactly what was written. A private lunch with Stephen Sondheim would be amazing. There is a lyric from West Side Story that is so beautiful. Stephen Sondheim has Tony sing the following line, after meeting Maria: "Today, the world was just

an address, a place for me to live in, no better than all right. But here you are and what was just a world, is a star.” I find that lyric so uncanny, so unexpected, so moving. Sondheim has been quoted as saying the lyric embarrasses him. I want to ask him why. I want to tell him that this lyric not only moves me, it inspires me in my work. I try to help my clients move away from unhappiness, to find their star.

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