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Vikki Ziegler

Posted by [Star-Ledger Staff](#) June 22, 2008 12:00AM

Categories: [Lawyer](#)

Active Advocate

Lawyer seeks to remove the stigma from divorce



Story by JOSEPH R. PERONE / Photos by JOHN MUNSON

Vikki Ziegler stands near a mahogany four-poster bed in the room where she slept as a child and clutches a faded piece of paper scribbled in the shaky hand of a dying man.

"I received this letter after he passed away," she says in the Victorian paneled room of her family home in Wayne. "It's like a gift."

The writer of the ragged words on that page was her 87-year-old grandfather, who died in South Africa while she was in law school. He told her he was proud she would become an attorney and "be able to earn a reasonable wage."

He also taught her to always maintain her integrity.

"My grandfather told me you have only one thing in this life," she says. "Your reputation. So, value it."

There was never any doubt Ziegler would pass the bar and become a divorce lawyer -- and a prominent one. She won her first unofficial case at age 12 by convincing her parents to seek joint custody so she could see both of them after their divorce in 1985.

Today, she is that passionate woman with expressive brown eyes and a quick retort who debates other attorneys on Fox and CNN about divorce and celebrity relationships. She bluntly shares her opinion, explains the law in simple terms and offers a dash of Passaic County attitude when she asks a TV host, "Are you kidding me?"

Screen presence

A stylish woman who favors David Yurman earrings, Ziegler is camera-ready for TV, according to Eric Spinato, a booker for Fox Business Network.

"She pops out of the screen," he says. "She is smart, outgoing and has a lot of energy. She believes not only in herself but in what she is saying."

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She assisted another partner in her firm in the high profile divorce battle between former New York Giant Michael Strahan and his wife. Ziegler was the attractive brunette with blonde highlights who was photographed accompanying Strahan to court.

Standing 5-foot-6, the 35-year-old divorcee is writing two books, "The All Star Divorce," a guide full of advice by experts aimed at people going through a breakup, and "Love Lies and Litigation," a novel about a sexy New York divorce lawyer who is looking for romance.

She founded or co-founded two websites, one about celebrity relationships (hookupsandbreakups.com) and another as a match-making site for the newly unwed (divorcedating.com). She also is creating an internet radio show about divorce and dating.

"There is a stigma attached to divorce, and I'm trying to lift it," she says. "The stigma is that there is something wrong with you or you are used goods, perhaps. Any failure turns into a success down the road."

Her parents' breakup convinced her to become a divorce lawyer.

"It's a very difficult time when you're going through your adolescence and your parents come to you and say, 'We're getting a divorce,'" she says. "The only way I can describe it is that it was like getting hit with a Mack truck. But, without that pain, I probably wouldn't work as hard and wouldn't care as much about my clients."

Born in Manhattan, Ziegler has lived in New Jersey since the second grade and graduated from Wayne Hills High School. She worked for a time as a fashion model.

She divides her time between her family home in Wayne -- a century-old vanilla cement ranch once owned by an heir to the Johnson & Johnson fortune -- and an apartment in Manhattan.

Bubbly and driven, Ziegler works 11 hours a day and often stays in New Jersey when working long hours for her law firm, Walder, Hayden & Brogan in Roseland. She is a voracious reader who kickboxes at night to relieve stress and keep her svelte frame in shape, and is a volunteer for the Make-A-Wish Foundation chapter in Passaic County.

Lori Lobosco McGrory, who has known Ziegler since eighth grade, recalled the time a decade ago when Ziegler took one of her Make-A-Wish kids on a shopping spree at a local mall.

"He was in a wheelchair, and his whole family was there," McGrory says. "She has helped a lot of different kids. We all want to help people, but she is the one who actually does it. She wants to give back to people who don't have anything."



Well-traveled

Inside Ziegler's office are Spanish water color paintings and African art work that reminds her of South Africa, where her parents were born. Ziegler visited Europe, the Middle East and Africa before she was 10, according to her mother, Lana Ladenheim.

"It exposed her to different ways of life and personalities," Ladenheim says in a South African accent.

"She has empathy for people who are underprivileged and sick," Ladenheim says. "When she was 16, we took her to see the bull fights in the mountains of Spain. As the bull came out and the first toreador struck the bull, she ran out crying because she couldn't stand the pain the bull was experiencing. It shows you she has a lot of sensitivity."

A self-described workaholic, Ziegler was selected as one of the top 40 lawyers under 40 by the New Jersey Law Journal in 2006.

"She's good because she loves it, she's hands on with it, and she's a hard worker," says Robert Penza, the law partner who was lead counsel for Michael Strahan. "She is married to matrimonial work, and the clients know she has a genuine affection for the work. Not every attorney has that, and none of them have the kind of rapport she has with her clients."

She enjoys giving clients a second chance through separated bliss.

"I'm not here to tell you I don't feel beat up sometimes," she says. "But when you're helping people, it's worth it."

Ziegler served as a law clerk several years ago for Michael Diamond, now the acting assignment judge for the Superior Court in Passaic County.

"She thinks very well on her feet, and she is always very prepared," he says. "I'm impressed with how well she handles herself on TV."

She also has a sense of humor. Diamond was surprised one day to receive an autographed photo of Michael Strahan. On the back, Strahan wrote: "Vikki is the best law clerk you ever had."

"Of course, Vikki put him up to it," Diamond says with a laugh.

On Ziegler's office desk is a huge, fake diamond ring she uses as a paperweight. She is not opposed to matrimony, just bad relationships.

Ziegler urges clients to obtain counseling before they throw in the bath towel on their union. But if the marriage is not just on the rocks but heading off a cliff, she tells them it's time to get on with their lives.

"You do damage when you remain in an unhealthy marriage and argue and show children the wrong way to behave to one another," she says.

Tells clients to remain civil

She tries to tell husbands and wives to remain civil to each other. She watched one couple fight over who would get a bottle of olive oil brought home from a trip to Italy. Other estranged couples have fought over who would get custody of their mattress or a dog's ashes.

"They were fighting over the mattress, and I said, 'Listen, we can't cut it in half,'" she says. "The wife, who was a big, burly woman, said, 'You're not going to sleep with anybody else on that bed,' and she went to hit her husband. I stood up and had to convince her it wasn't worth it."

She calmed the situation by devising a way for the wife to pay her husband for his share of the mattress. "You have to create solutions everyone can live with," she says.

Ziegler doesn't buy the argument that couples should stay together for the sake of the children.

"Think about it. You see parents fighting, disrespectful, no nightly dinner together, no communication," she says. "What message does that send to children?"

"A lot of my clients feel guilty because they're leaving, and their children are young and they wanted them to grow up with both parents," she says. "I always try to impart to them, you have no idea what a service you are doing for them now. You can't undo the past, but you can make the future better for them, too."

She urges parents to get counseling for the children as well as themselves because a divorce can be like a death in the family to a child.

Ziegler knew the pain of her parents' divorce, and she felt it again when she split from her husband three years ago. She was married at 29 and divorced by 32.

"Many people get married for the wrong reasons," she says. "Sometimes people feel pressured. Sometimes others think your significant other is right for you and he or she is financially secure. They may look good on paper, but that may not necessarily be the case."

"People don't always talk about their hopes and dreams and if they want children," she says. "When people come together quickly and they don't realize their spouse doesn't put the toilet seat down or she doesn't know how to cook, all of a sudden there is friction. Rudimentary problems become bigger problems for lack of communication and honesty."

Tries to empower women

What counsel does she provide to women who feel disrespected and stuck in a bad marriage?

"I try to empower them to understand that no one is ever stuck emotionally or financially," she says. "I'm not going to say you'll be on easy street, going to Bergdorf Goodman every day. But if you are really emotionally unhappy and you want out of your marriage and you feel like you are in prison, there is a way to do it."

Some people go back into the work force after a breakup. One former client who never worked while she was married became a successful six-figure real estate broker after her divorce, according to Ziegler.

"Whoever thought you could be successful on your own without being dependent on somebody else? I've seen it happen," she says.

She often drops plans on weekends to make a quick TV appearance when a booker calls. Ziegler hopes the time she is putting in eventually will allow her to become a regular contributor to a TV network on legal affairs.

Cerebral and confident, Ziegler reads three newspapers a day and peruses two books at a time. Although she enjoys being a TV commentator, for which she is not paid, she won't use the lure of celebrity to defend a disingenuous position.

Grandfather would never approve.

"I've turned down many, many shows because they wanted me to take a position I don't believe in," she says. "I will not give an opinion if I don't believe in it."

Will she remarry?

Absolutely. In fact, her black handbag is emblazoned with the word "Romance."

But she is setting the bar high for whoever wins her hand.

"I feel like I have a lot to give and a lot to offer," she says. "I would want someone who is highly motivated, has a love of family, is kind, fun and knows how to communicate. You can't have a successful relationship without communication."

She prizes long-term friendships. She hadn't been to Vinni's Pizzeria on Hamburg Turnpike in Wayne in a long time. It was a favorite hangout during high school. Ziegler drops in with a visitor for a slice one afternoon and it's like old home week.

"How you doin', hon?" she says, stroking the cheek of owner Joseph DeLuca, who has known her for three decades. He smiles from behind the counter to greet her.

"They were the best kids," he says of Ziegler and her classmates who used to jam the pizza parlor during lunch hour. "You can't say that about some kids today. If I ever need a lawyer, it's her."

Additional insights:

Favorite food: popcorn

Favorite restaurant: Il Mulino in Manhattan

Favorite destination: South Africa

Favorite store: Channel

Favorite designer: Karl Lagerfeld

Favorite charity: Make-A-Wish Foundation

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