

TALKING WITH LORI DOUGLASS



Carucha L. Meuse/The Journal News

Lori Douglass sits at her desk at the law firm of Moses & Singer LLP in Manhattan. Douglass works as a trust and real estate lawyer.

Lawyer fulfills key need

Trust, estate counsel helps close up a gap in the black community

Allan Drury
The Journal News

When Lori Douglass was in high school, she enjoyed watching the criminal arraignments in the Kings County courtroom where her father, state Supreme Court Justice Lewis Douglass, presided.

"That experience was looked very exciting to me," Douglass, 44, said. "The attorneys looked exciting to me — fast on their feet, talking, making their arguments, being able to argue with somebody. It was all the things I kind of liked to do."

Douglass succeeded in her quest to become a criminal lawyer, working as

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Lori Douglass of Greenburgh, a lawyer at Moses & Singer LLP

a prosecutor in the office of the New York County district attorney from 1989 to 1993. But when she left the District Attorney's Office to help her husband get organized in his insurance practice, she began getting interested in estate planning.

"I recognized that this was really a feel that the African-American community needed but there weren't a lot of African-American attorneys practicing

estate law," she said.

Douglass, a Greenburgh resident who is now with the firm of Moses & Singer LLP in Manhattan, believes she has found a niche in an underserved market. The growing wealth of African-Americans has spawned a need for trust and estate lawyers in the black community, she said.

Douglass helps clients plan the transfer of their businesses and other

assets and represents estates, beneficiaries and heirs through probate and administration proceedings. She also helps them with accounting and tax matters.

A graduate of the Syracuse University College of Law talked about her career in an e-mail exchange with The Journal News.

Q: Why are there so few African-American lawyers doing trust and estate work?

A: Historically the African-American community has not had the opportunity to accumulate wealth in this country to the same degree as other communities. We have made significant strides in business and wealth accumulation and there is now a great need to educate the African-American community about how to effectively transfer that wealth to future generations. If history

Please see DOUGLASS, 12C

Lawyer fulfills need in the black community

DOUGLASS, from 10C

ically a community does not have a need for estate planning, the young lawyers coming out of law school are not going to gravitate toward that field. Hence, there are few African-American attorneys who specialize in this area. To compound the problem, most white estate planning attorneys are either not aware of the need in the African-American community or simply do not reach out to us. Hopefully as the economic picture for the African-American community continues to brighten, our young lawyers will recognize the need to have attorneys who specialize in this field and our numbers will increase.

Q: What is the biggest misconception about trust and estate planning your clients tend to have when they first consult with you?

A: The biggest misconception is that people think they do not have an estate for which to plan. The reality is that once you have a child and any income and assets at all, it is time to start estate planning. For example, many people do not realize that a will is the only legal document in which one can appoint guardians for minor children in the event of the death of both parents. Also, if you die without a will, your assets will be distributed in accordance with the state's distribution pattern and not necessarily in a manner that is tax efficient or appropriate for your specific family situation. Once someone recognizes the need to start the process, many delay in taking action because they think



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Lori Douglass stands at the law firm of Moses & Singer LLP in Manhattan, where she works as an attorney.

it will be overly complicated and it is always difficult to discuss your own mortality.

Q: Do you think you'll ever return to handling criminal cases, either as a prosecutor or a defense lawyer?

A: I do not think so. My years as a New York County assistant district attorney were inspiring and gave me a great foundation in trial advocacy. Today my trial work is limited to Surrogate's Court litigation in contested estate administration and guardianship matters.

Q: How do you feel about the reputation the legal profession (either fairly or unfairly) has gained in the last 20 years or so?

A: I am honored to be a member of the bar. The large majority of attorneys are hard working and caring professionals. People can make all the jokes they want about lawyers, but at some point in life, everyone needs a lawyer. I can only speak for the members of the profession with whom I work and my partners at Moses & Singer have a well-deserved reputation of being exceptional attorneys.

Q: Do you feel your race and gender have been an advantage or a hindrance in your career? Or have they been neutral factors?

A: There is nothing neutral

about being an African-American in the United States. I am proud to be an African-American woman and therefore have never thought of it as a hindrance but like all African-Americans, I have to be exceptional to be perceived as good.

Q: What advice would you give a young lawyer just starting a career?

A: Choose an area of the law that you feel passionate about because you are going to have to work long, long hours. If you love what you do, like I do, it makes putting in the long hours much easier and very worthwhile.

Q: What is the biggest challenge you faced in your career?

A: The biggest challenge has been to build a law practice that concentrates on succession planning and wealth preservation while predominantly serving a community that greatly needs the service but has to be educated as to why it is so important. I have yet to overcome it because not every person has a current, up to date, estate plan, but I am working on it!

Reach Allan Drury
at adrury@lohud.com
or 914-694-5069.