

MATT ARNOUX

Adversity Made a Difference for Lawyer and Family Law Clients

by Ruth Kaufman



Matthew C. Arnoux, partner at Birnbaum, Haddon, Gelfman & Arnoux, LLC, is tired of hearing lawyers grumble.

“Every day when I hear lawyers complain about the law and being a lawyer, I just shake my head because it’s a privilege to be able to practice law—to have people stop and listen to what you’re saying and occasionally agree. I have to pinch myself because I’m very lucky to be able to do it.”

Arnoux’s practice includes handling complex family law matters, litigating cases involving substantial estates, representing clients in disputed custody and visitation cases, representing children as a court-appointed guardian and structuring prenuptial agreements. Because of his extensive trial experience, he’s able to settle most of his cases.

“There aren’t a lot of guys in this division like Matt,” says Divorce Division Judge Raul Vega, who has known Arnoux for about 15 years via his court appearances. “He has a good sense of humor in spite of all of the stress and everything involved in these cases. He’s an excellent lawyer, formidable opponent and a gentleman. He’s also knowledgeable, competent and confident. There’s a point where you can be too confident—in that case, you’re cocky. That’s not him.”

Judge Vega frequently appoints Arnoux as a guardian ad litem or child’s representative on difficult cases. “He does an excellent job. He’s

concerned about the kids when representing them. He’s not one of these guys in it for the money. He sees cases through to the end.”

Jessica Marshall, junior partner at family law firm Anderson & Boback, has worked with Arnoux when he was appointed as a child’s representative or guardian ad litem on several cases she’s worked on.

“Whenever I have an issue where I need someone who’s going to jump into action right away regarding a minor child, I usually ask that the court appoint him. The judge usually doesn’t hesitate, nor do other attorneys if they have had a case with him. That says a lot in our area.”

“Matt goes the extra mile,” Marshall adds. “He’s a zealous advocate and really looks out for what’s in the best interest of these kids. Unfortunately, there aren’t many attorneys out there that take on this role as seriously as I think he does.”

Growing up in the northwest suburbs, Arnoux realized a constant tension or dichotomy that provides a sense of who he is as a person. As one example, in high school he was voted both the “biggest partier” and “most likely to succeed.”

After being selected to give the high school graduation speech, the administration was on pins and needles not knowing what he was going to say. They worried he’d go off script, but he gave his speech without the

administration pulling him off the stage. “I was a campus radical. People now would find that amusing.”

But if he’d listened to a high school teacher, he’d have pursued a different career. The teacher said he’d never become a lawyer because his writing was horrendous. Instead of believing that, Arnoux used it as motivation.

Arnoux considers his four years at Georgetown University a great experience. He appreciated his first taste of living and working in a dynamic city. During school and in the summers, he had interned with the National Republican Congressional Committee and the Department of Labor while also working disparate jobs on campus.

He graduated *cum laude* with a B.A., majoring in economics with a political science minor.

“After graduation, I didn’t know what I wanted to do. Most friends were going on to graduate school of some kind.” Arnoux didn’t necessarily want to go into the workforce and thought law seemed more interesting than business school. He also thought he could make more of a difference as a lawyer than he could in business. He chose the University of Illinois because it was more economical.

Adjusting to the culture shift from big city D.C. to small town Champaign took some time. While in law school, he worked in a couple of smaller firms. Upon graduation, the only job he could find was working with an

Arlington Heights solo practitioner who did everything from wills to divorce.

DOWN RABBIT HOLE AND OUT AGAIN

“Meantime, I was going down the rabbit hole very quickly. In a very short period of time, I managed to single-handedly work on ruining my life with drinking and all the while practicing law,” Arnoux says.

There were times he represented criminal traffic defendants in the same courtroom in which he was a defendant. At that time, Arnoux thought that was normal. Soon, he was homeless, living out of a car without a driver’s license, and with “repo guys one step behind me” as he tried to practice law.

Lacking insurance, Arnoux eventually admitted himself to a state-run rehab program, then spent nine months in a halfway house in Palos Park.

“In 1988, I realized I wasn’t equipped to practice law.” He voluntarily gave up his law license. Concentrating on his recovery for five years, Arnoux took odd jobs, from working on a children’s farm sweeping horse stables to washing dishes, working at a bookstore and being a waiter at Giordano’s.

“It’s no coincidence. Everything that happens in my life happens the way it’s supposed to happen. All these things were necessary to have the opportunities and blessings I have now.”

He hasn’t had a drink for over 30 years, and he is active in helping others in recovery.

By 1993, thanks to the grace he received in his recovery, Arnoux felt ready to practice law again. He applied to a few law firms but wondered who’d hire an attorney with a multi-year departure from the legal field and a resume filled with waiter gigs.

In October, Jeffrey M. Leving, known as the fathers’ rights lawyer, gave Arnoux a chance. “It made me the happiest guy in the world that someone would hire and pay and would trust me to work for them. I was and am very grateful to Jeff for the opportunity he gave me.”

And that’s how Arnoux fell into family law. He began trying cases right away, and within a year had an 80-day custody trial. For nine years, he worked with a fairly dynamic group that had a niche practice primarily representing men.

In 2002, he made the transition from that environment to Nadler Pritikin Mirabelli LLC, a firm of about 25 family lawyers with a more diverse practice representing both sides and also children.

EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON

When in his 40s, he looked up and realized his life had gotten away from him.

Then one day a woman named Bobbi Panter came in for a consultation. Though at

the time she wanted to save her marriage, as Arnoux offered advice, she said she saw a ticker tape over his head that read, “You are going to marry this man.”

Her marriage didn’t work out. After she got divorced, she and Arnoux started dating. They married in 2005.

Panter, an actress turned entrepreneur, had started a line of natural pet products in her kitchen that became so successful with appearances on QVC she could no longer handle the manufacturing alone. She took in a private investor who then forced her out of

her own company.

Panter turned that setback into a positive by directing her energies toward charitable causes such as Canine Companions for Independence and Friends of Conservation, among others. Now the couple is active in charitable events for multiple organizations, and she is co-chair of the Canine Companions for Independence Event in Los Angeles. “A big part of our focus is giving back to those not as fortunate as we have been,” Arnoux says.

Arnoux represents children in about a third of his cases. You might wonder how a lawyer



Wife Bobbi Painter and Arnoux at Lake Como in Northern Italy



Arnoux and Painter take a break for a meal in Venice.



Arnoux at his French Riviera “remote office” at the Hotel DuCap



The couple catch a Blackhawks playoff game in Tampa Bay.

who is not a parent can do that effectively. Arnoux quotes Shylock from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*: "If you prick us, do we not bleed? You don't have to have children to have a certain level of empathy and commonality."

During such a storied career, what stands out? One proud moment was getting sworn in at the U.S. Supreme Court in 2010. He brought his parents to Washington, D.C., for the ceremony. Neither of Arnoux's parents graduated college. "I'm very thankful I could share that day with my parents, who helped me so much to get where I am."

In 2011, 11 attorneys left Nadler Pritikin & Mirabelli to form what became Birnbaum, Haddon, Gelfman & Arnoux, LLC. Arnoux thinks the thing that holds his firm apart from many other family law firms is the lack of drama and internal conflict.

"Not to denigrate fellow practitioners, but many of us in this field are attracted to drama, the wounded healer concept. Here, we have a group that has worked hard on their life experiences and doesn't externalize these issues, which leaves us in a better position to serve our clients."

Arnoux handles many of the firm's trials and complicated cases, but he realizes settlement in almost all cases is preferred. "I know the collateral damage on families when they actually litigate. Exposing people's defects and shortcomings is not the ideal way to resolve these issues, and it can be a real shame."

One of Birnbaum's bywords is "fearless," and it appears prominently on their website. "That doesn't mean we're masters of the universe. It means to fear less," Arnoux explains.

"We're not mental health professionals, but we play a role in helping people get to the next stage of their lives. If along the way we can



Chicago Blackhawks legend Bobby Hull with Arnoux



Arnoux, Painter, and Lakesha and Jim Rose at a PAWS charity event

teach by example, composing ourselves with dignity, then maybe there's a seed planted. There is truly nothing in this world about which we should be afraid."

And sometimes he sees good people acting badly. He asks emotional clients, "Is option A, B or C best for your case? What are the ramifications six months after the divorce? Will you wake up and feel like you have a big hangover and ask yourself, 'Why did I do this?'"

"I have to be mindful as to what I'm doing. Recently, a client whose last kid was out of college called. He thanked me and said he'd never forget what I told him after his divorce: 'Be nice to your ex-wife, the mother of your kids.' I felt good that maybe I added some value. And one of my partners says, 'Don't forget that you're playing with nitroglycerin.' We need to be mindful."

Every day through his 37th-floor corner office window, he can see the Lawson YMCA on Chicago Avenue. "One of the happiest nights of my life was in the 1980s. I was homeless and scrounged together \$25 so I could stay there two nights.

"Whenever I'm having a day when I lose my gratitude, I can look out my window and see that building and remind myself of that. I have the blessing of looking at how my life was and knowing all of us can get through these things

if we have a little patience, faith and trust."

Both he and his wife learned from difficult situations. "Lifechanging events don't happen by accident. Oprah once said when asked what she's going to do next, she was going to lean into the universe. We should all try that, and if we do, it always leads to something better," Arnoux suggests.

The large, metal letter T on his credenza represents trust and thankfulness. "My life experience helps me prepare for this kind of work. In my practice, I endeavor to give my clients a residue of hope."

Fellow partner Jimmy Haddon, who has been practicing law for more than 50 years, knew Arnoux before they worked at the same firm. He considers Arnoux one of the finest, hardest-working lawyers he's ever met.

"Matt is dedicated, conscientious, trustworthy and honest. And he's talented and creative. I put Matt at the top of the heap. On a personal level, I've always enjoyed Matt as an extremely knowledgeable sports fan."

Arnoux also does a lot of pro bono work. When not lawyering or supporting charities, he and Panter travel frequently, including a yearly trip to France and Italy. The couple endeavors to balance their personal and professional lives.

"I'm very blessed," Arnoux says. ■