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[Harriet Newman Cohen](#)

THE SECOND LIFE OF HARRIET COHEN

What the Matrimonial Lawyer Learned to Share With the World

New York Metro Super Lawyers

by [Michael Y. Park](#)

Harriet Newman Cohen's life ended in 1973.

She was the 40-year-old mother of four girls, a full-time law student and a believer in the idea that a woman's primary duty is to care for her children and support her husband. So when the man she'd been married to for 21 years abruptly told her he was leaving, it wasn't just that the life she'd worked so hard to create was collapsing.

"I said, 'I think my life is over. I'm a 40-year-old woman with four children. Who is ever going to want me?'" Cohen says now. "And I have to tell you, I felt really old at 40."

The Harriet Newman Cohen of today would be unrecognizable to that 40-year-old. In her cleanly appointed 42nd Street office overlooking Bryant Park, she's bright, airy and at ease with the world, a dead ringer for Diane Keaton and head of one of the most successful family law firms in New York.

To the people who know her, of course, Cohen's ascent into divorce law's elite is no surprise.

She grew up in Providence, R.I., the eldest daughter of four children born to well-educated, music-loving Eastern European immigrants. Her father, from Ukraine, manufactured Hula Hoops; her Polish mother stayed at home with the kids and their Yiddish-speaking grandmother and imbued Cohen with the philosophies that you never give up and you always finish what you start.

"I have a memory of the hurricane of September 1938," says Cohen, who was in kindergarten at the time. "My mother told me I didn't have to go to school because the trees were down and it was difficult to get to school, but that if I wanted to go to school, I could. I remember how beautiful it was in school that day with all the teachers to myself."

Competitive and book smart, Cohen found her calling early as a 10-year-old in elocution class. A frequent stage performer, she once delivered an emotional monologue about a dog that died. "There wasn't a dry eye in the room—and I didn't even have a dog," she says. "I learned the joy of being able to persuade."

When the family moved to New York City, Cohen attended school in Brooklyn, skipping grades and graduating at age 16 to become a Barnard College classics major. She married her high school sweetheart, a talented musician and chemist, when she was 19, and moved to Wilmington, Del. While her husband was working for DuPont, Cohen got her master's degree in classics at nearby Bryn Mawr College and started raising her first daughter.

"I was a full-time mother," Cohen says. "I had debated this [with myself] at Barnard, that being a girl—I didn't call myself a woman in those days—that the best thing an educated woman could do was stay at home and support her husband in his career and raise her children."

She did this for more than a decade—through the family's move back to New York City and the births of another three children. In the late '60s, when her husband's business began to falter, and wearied by a math-teaching job she'd taken to help pay the bills, law school began to make sense.

"I wanted to make a difference in the world, but in those days, women weren't taken very seriously, especially women with children at home," Cohen says. "For a woman in those days to have some credibility, I would need to be a lawyer, because lawyers were taken very seriously."

But through it all, she defined herself mostly as wife and mother. Then the bombshell.

"I remember that first year, when they were separated, she lost about 20 pounds very rapidly," says Martha Stine, Cohen's oldest daughter and now a partner at Cohen's firm. "She didn't have the luxury to feel too sorry for herself because she had four children. She kind of pulled herself together, and we took it one day at a time. She has a lot of wisdom from her own life experience that makes her very compassionate with her clients."

Patricia Cohen Epstein, the youngest child, remembers that, even though their mother was immersed in law school and the divorce, she was there for them. "She would get home, we would have dinner together, and I remember doing homework at the dining room table with my sister, Sue, my mother and myself, the three of us still at home," says Epstein, now a civil litigator in Wisconsin. "She made us feel like there was nothing we could not do."

In law school, things went well for Cohen. At a party, someone suggested she get on the law review as soon as possible; Cohen did. Though her fellow law students were overwhelmingly twenty-something males, Cohen wasn't deterred, and often brought her daughters to class.

"[Years later] I ended up going to the same law school and having some of the same professors," Epstein says with a laugh. Cohen's other two daughters, Amy and Sue, are now a flutist and a doctor.

The new Harriet Cohen was born in 1974. That year, she graduated near the top of her class and was a sought-after attorney. Among her first clients: herself. She handled her own divorce.

At her first firm, her age actually became an asset. "I was 41 years old, not 23. When I met with clients, I seemed mature and seasoned," Cohen says.

That same year, Cohen found love again. The week after her law school graduation, she worked up the courage to call a friend of a friend, a recent widower named Arthur Feinberg, a successful physician, to introduce herself and try to interest him in asking her on a date—which he did the very next evening. "I started the whole second chapter of my life," she says. "I never, ever would have left my first life, because it just wouldn't have occurred to me. If my first husband hadn't made the decision that he wanted out of the marriage, I would have stayed with him for my whole life and been a completely different person."

Cohen and Feinberg, who married in 1983, were together for 32 years before Feinberg died of vascular disease and open-heart surgery in November 2005.

Though she'd been warned not to get pigeonholed into areas that were seen as "women's stuff," like family law or trusts and estates, Cohen found herself quickly gravitating toward matrimonial law. "She can reach people on a human level that's very, very difficult to achieve in a combative situation," says partner Bonnie Rabin. "She can really identify, because there isn't anything that a client is going through that she can't help with [via] her life experience."

On her way to founding her own firm in 1994, Cohen became known for high-profile clients who began trickling to her through word-of-mouth: Andrew Cuomo, Patricia Duff, Laurence Fishburne, Linda Lavin and Ann Dexter-Jones. Many remained friends with Cohen after their legal battles.

"I'll never forget the coffees in china cups on a silver tray that she served me herself," says Lavin, who played the title role in *Alice*, one of the first single moms on '70s TV, and who hired Cohen for her divorce in 1989. "She's someone who's become my friend because of the kind of person she is. Everything she's been through helps her as a lawyer."

Cohen says she learned the importance of a good bedside manner from her second husband. "My clients are often partners to me," she explains. "There's nothing of the idea that 'I'm the doctor, you're the patient, listen to me.' I need to know their goals, get into their background. I take a history by going all the way back to the grandparents on each side."

Socialite Dexter-Jones remembers Cohen, who replaced Dexter-Jones's previous lawyer only five weeks before trial, as her rock during her divorce from a rock guitarist.

"Harriet didn't make any fairy tale promises," Dexter-Jones says. "But in court, Harriet was standing beside me, and in front of me and behind me—let's put it like that."

Cohen doesn't pull any punches, either, even with her own clients, who are roughly equal numbers men and women.

"She knows how to control her client, and that's very important," says sometime adversary David A. Field of Field Lomenzo. "I remember she was representing a husband who was not being altogether reasonable or practical, and she was able to use her influence on him to have him

realize he was out of line. She got him to calm down and realize how off-the-wall he was in the situation."

"Harriet's very good at calling it like it is and helping the client understand what the realities of the situation are," says Claire Gutekunst of Proskauer Rose, who has acted as Cohen's co-counsel. "She's very people-oriented but not swayed easily. If someone tries to push, she's quite capable of pushing back."

While clients appreciate Cohen's knack for making legal proceedings understandable and less frightening, her colleagues admire her ability to make attorneys and judges look past the legalese to what's really at stake.

"Do you know what the classic Harriet move is?" Rabin says. "You'll have an argument going on in court, and she will suddenly start speaking from the most passionate human level to bring everyone back to the reality of how a court order is going to affect a client. ... It's masterful."

Cohen has garnered her share of criticism by being part of the vocal minority that opposes introducing no-fault divorces to New York. "There are situations where the wrongdoer wants the divorce, and the other person is really pure as the driven snow," she says. "That person has the right to say, 'Show me why you have the right to take my children, take my assets, take my income.'"

In a similar vein, some lawyers say she goes over-the-top in painting clients as saints while demonizing estranged spouses. Cohen simply thinks her passion is misunderstood. "I'm my client's advocate, and that's my job," Cohen says. "I've got a thick skin and I'm willing to stand up and fight if I have to."

"Within the first moments when we met, we had our first arguments," says partner Rabin with a laugh. "I remember very vividly being in the judge's chambers once and being assigned to represent a child of one of her clients, and telling Harriet she could no longer talk directly to the child. And I remember her arguing that she protected the client, so therefore she protected the children. The law was on my side, but we've been debating those types of issues of vigilant advocacy ever since."

"She's very much like a lioness, always protective of her brood," says daughter Epstein. "And I think her brood extends beyond her family to include her clients."

When Cohen thought her life was ending in 1973, she was wrong, her daughters say. She wasn't ending one life and beginning a new one so much as learning to share her innate strengths as a mother with the wider world.

"If the Harriet of today could speak to the Harriet back then during that difficult time, she'd tell herself, 'You're going to meet a very wonderful man, be a wife, mother and grandmother, and you're going to have a career beyond your wildest dreams,'" daughter Stine says. "She'd say, 'Don't do anything differently.'"

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