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News for Associates and Young Lawyers

Conversation with

... a Brooklyn associate in the 11-lawyer elder law boutique Freedman, Fish & Grimaldi who has learned to gain the confidence of her old-world clients.



NEIL PHOTORICK KOPSTEIN

Pauline Yeung

Q: Most of your clients are elderly Chinese immigrants. You are the daughter of Hong Kong immigrants, a graduate of Vassar College and St. John's University School of Law and you're fluent in Mandarin and Cantonese. Yet still you feel an age barrier with your clientele?

A: If I'm on the telephone, they think I'm 50. I'm 30, but I look 24.

Q: So why elder law?

A: When I was in law school, my grandfather had a stroke and went to the hospital, and afterward got rehab care at a nursing home. He was living on Social Security, his one asset was the house he owned.

At the nursing home, they told him he had to leave after 100 days because he owned a house. He was on his own. Nobody told him about speaking to an elder law attorney. He was given no guidance about Medicaid planning, or how he could apply for home care benefits.

Q: Is this typical of elderly Chinese?

A: They're very hard-working, and when there's trouble they try to take care of it themselves. Going to a lawyer is a last resort. Like going to a doctor — only when they're really, really sick.

Q: It sounds like a lawyer-phobic client group. How do you break through?

A: Usually when I get a call, it's not from the older person. It's from family members in their 50s or 60s trying to convince mom and dad to come in for help. They're my gap-fillers. Mom and dad always respect the children.

Q: How do you move from the gap-fillers to addressing mom and dad?

A: I begin with a trust relationship that allows them to reveal information. There has to be a lot of trust. I'll ask them, 'How many children do you have?' and 'How's your health?' I tell them I know some good doctors in Chinatown. I ask about their house. I show that I care.

Q: And then suddenly these hard-working old people from China open up and tell all their troubles to a young woman

born in New York?

A: They'll test me. They'll say, 'What you mean by this? What do you mean by that?' So it's not easy. Eight out of 10 will look at me and say, 'Oh, you're so young.' Given the choice between two attorneys — a 40-year-old with no experience in elder law, or a 30-year-old who specializes in elder law — they'll choose the older one. And they'll listen to the male versus the female. But if you give them the law, if you present your case professionally and with respect, they'll trust you. It becomes a personal relationship.

Q: So now it's personal. You can talk about anything?

A: Not the taboos. To speak of death and disability is a curse. You'll be jinxed.

Q: But death and disability — aren't they the very reasons for elder law? How do you avoid talking about that?

A: I talk about protecting money and sheltering assets. I ask them, 'Would you like to protect your bank accounts?' They're very nervous when I talk about assigning property to their children as trustees. Chinese parents always like to have control. Talking about costs helps — \$10,000 for guardianship proceedings, versus power of attorney for \$200 or \$400. I'm sorry to say, sometimes I scare them. I just make them aware of consequences. They have to understand that they need protection.

Q: What about public outreach to elderly Chinese?

A: I give talks at nursing homes and senior centers. I've been on the radio a few times. It always goes well in the nursing homes. What comes back is, 'I wish I'd known you earlier.' And I think, I wish I could have helped you earlier.

— By Thomas Adcock

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