

Angela Buttitta

Shining a Light Through the Darkness of Divorce

by Chris Bailey

ROSELLE — Angela M. Buttitta’s life is a bit of a Venn diagram, the overlapping circles representing the many families of which she is a part, with her the bright light at their point of intersection.

Proudly Italian, intensely energetic and absolutely bubbling with the joy she takes in each of her families, Buttitta now seems a natural fit for her professional family, the Chicago divorce law firm of **Birnbaum, Haddon, Gelfman & Arnoux, LLC**. But the route she traveled to get there has been circuitous.

“I was a numbers girl,” says Buttitta, trying to explain how she ended up an attorney despite her bachelor’s degree in accounting from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. “My father always said I should graduate with a profession and accounting seemed like a suitable one. He also said no one could ever take away what I worked to put behind my last name, and that ‘Attorney at Law’ instantly commands a level of respect.”

Her parents, Dominic, Sr., and Michaelene, worked together in commercial real estate development from their base in Roselle. They were instrumental in her becoming an attorney and in her commitment to the various families of which she is a member.

“Our parents took us to work almost every day,” says Buttitta. “They always had very close friends who came to the office who were attorneys. I saw that my father always valued the advice and help they gave him.”

Thus, when “the numbers” began to offer less appeal, her mind returned to her parents’ workplace.

“Accounting was not enough action for me,” says Buttitta. “I needed more, and law school had always been in the back of my mind.”

She received her J.D. from the John Marshall School of Law in Chicago, working during law school as a clerk for



one of those attorneys her parents' called a friend, Stephen P. Carponelli.

"He was definitely a mentor for me all through law school and beyond," says Buttitta, just as she became a mentor for her siblings, younger sister Dominique and brother, Dominic, Jr. Both followed her to Miami University for their undergraduate work.

Family, Family Everywhere

"Angela was the trailblazer," says Dominique, who focuses on estate planning, business, corporate and real estate law. She joined brother Dominic at Buttitta Law Group, LLC, in Barrington in 2015. She also attended John Marshall.

"Angela always made sure we had at least one class together each semester during the time we were there together," says Dominique. "She was very protective of her siblings and helped both of us with our professions."

Despite the fact he chose Valparaiso University School of Law over John Marshall, her brother nonetheless saw his oldest sister in a similar light.

"Angela was the pioneer of the family," says Dominic. "When it comes to being a lawyer, Angela is my mentor. I think it is rare that all of us would become lawyers since our parents were not attorneys. But I think our parents might be proudest that we all work so well together."

That's not to say that her siblings haven't identified and pointed out a few flaws, as only siblings can.

"Angela is a really organized person," says Dominique. "I'm pretty sure she's anal retentive."

"You know, most people respect the fact that someone is on vacation," says a laughing Dominic. "Not Angela. I'll be out in a fishing boat in Minnesota, open up my phone and find 25 work-related emails — all from Angela."

But Angela Buttitta owns the truth.

"I've also been known to call him in the middle of the night to discuss a case," she says, laughing along with him. She also considers him responsible, in a good way, for her marriage.

He introduced Buttitta to her husband, Gino Grisi, a mortgage and real estate broker who has an office suite just above hers in Roselle.

"I was introduced to him by my brother at a Bulls game," says Angela. "We dated ever since."

They eventually married and now have an almost 2-year-old daughter, Dominique, forming the newest of those Venn family circles. Little Dominique was born on her grandfather's birthday and Buttitta says, "She completely rocked my world. I can't imagine loving anything more."

Despite Angela's partnership in Birnbaum, Haddon, Gelfman & Arnoux, the three siblings still interact professionally on a

regular basis. She routinely bounces between the Barrington office where Dominic and Dominique make their professional home,



From left: Buttitta, daughter Dominique A. Grisi, husband Gino A. Grisi



From left: father Dominic J. Buttitta, mother Michaelene Buttitta, Buttitta, husband Gino A. Grisi, sister Dominique A. Buttitta, brother Dominic J. Buttitta, Jr.



From left: Buttitta, Stuart G. Gelfman, Francis A. Gembala, Jacalyn Birnbaum, James T. Haddon, Matthew C. Arnoux, Elizabeth I. Reed

the Roselle office she launched for her firm, and its downtown office.

Offers They Couldn't Refuse

In fact, Dominique and Angela were once partners in a short-lived law firm they created, Buttitta Law Offices, LLC. It didn't fail so much as dissolve in the face of professional opportunities that arose shortly thereafter that neither could find reason to refuse.

"We were partners together, and she was my best friend," says Dominique of her professional moment of truth with her sister. Dominique had received a great job offer that included handling the affairs of Rocky Wirtz, the owner of the Chicago Blackhawks. "I was really conflicted, but Angela said, 'This is a great offer. You have to take it.'"

As it turned out, a similar great offer was headed Angela's way, too. In 2012, Jacalyn Birnbaum called to ask her to join Birnbaum, Haddon, Gelfman & Arnoux. It wasn't entirely out of the blue, for the law firm was the third iteration of a firm that originated as Nadler, Pritikin & Mirabelli, LLC, where Angela had worked after graduating from law school.

When she accepted the offer, the firm became yet another family in her life, with all the ties that entails.

"My law partner, Jimmy Haddon, is like a father to me, and a mentor," says Angela. "And now my daughter is kind of the firm baby. All my law partners attended my wedding. In fact, many of the momentous things in my life have been celebrated with them."

She says Jacalyn Birnbaum has been especially instrumental in her professional life.

"Jacalyn is particularly special to me and has been a big proponent of mine," says Buttitta. "She is a strong, highly intelligent woman who I strive to emulate. But I adore, respect and look up with admiration to every single one of my partners."

Jacalyn Birnbaum says the firm is very picky about whom it lets into its professional family. Buttitta passed all those tests.

"We are very careful about who we invite into our inner circle," says Birnbaum. "We look for triple digit IQs and kindness. We want people who have a similar world view."

And that view is optimistic, not pessimistic, she says, referencing a Winston Churchill quote before asking a question of her own.

"Who do you want to work with — someone who is happy or someone who is miserable?" asks Birnbaum. "Angela is a delight, someone who is hard-working, with great stability and judgment. She's a solid citizen, just an old-fashioned, solid girl."

That is why when Buttitta discovered she was pregnant and wanted to create

a suburban satellite office so she could reduce travel time and have a way to bring her daughter to work, no one at the firm batted an eye.

"The point of our firm is to get people's lives from chaos to order," says Birnbaum. "We're trying to get them to embrace the future. So why in the world wouldn't we do that for a member of our own firm? And technology being what it is today, location isn't really an issue."

As a result, toddler Dominique is now a regular at Angela's office, much as she was at that of her parents.

"Her first word was 'Mama,'" says Buttitta. "Her second word was 'Dada.'"

"Her third was 'deal,'" says Buttitta, her eyes dancing. "I think maybe I've been taking her to the office a bit too much."

Whether she was serious or joking about that third word, she clearly recognizes the intricacies of balancing work and family. And finding balance is what Angela Buttitta seems to do best.

Birnbaum describes the practice of family law as "getting people from the darkness into the light. Most people can agree on the facts, but the interpretation of those facts is often wildly disparate."

"You need to be somewhat of a good therapist and a good listener," says Angela, of family law. "But divorce is hell, and it's my job to get my clients through hell as easily and peacefully as possible."

Reducing the Rancor

She says her main job is convincing hurt and sometimes vengeful clients that "being reasonable" is nonetheless in their long-term interest.

Not an easy task when a client starts out by saying, "I don't care about anything else, but I want that car, because I know how much my husband loves it."

She says another client told her, "I'd rather put all my money in your pocket than give one dollar more to my wife."

Buttitta says her greatest frustration is having negotiated "what I know is a great deal for a client and then they won't accept it. They often think they are entitled to more."

Convincing those in her client family otherwise is another of her skills, one she unleashes with great patience and an ability to inject logic into emotion at the precise moment when a client actually might be open to hearing it.

"Some of my clients have never paid a bill in their life," explains Buttitta, who says some divorce clients don't understand that they will suddenly become responsible for managing their own financial lives, and that it will be an altered financial reality at that.

That's how she convinced the woman whose

only goal was to make off with her husband's beloved classic car to change her mind.

"I told her, 'I can get you the car, but it isn't going to help you pay the mortgage down the road,'" says Buttitta, who has an edge of steel hidden under all that patience and understanding.

"Most clients are more reasonable about child support, wanting what is best for their children." And that, she says, can open the door to more "reasonable" expectations on other aspects of the divorce.

"Angela can take an otherwise hostile situation and turn it into unicorns and rainbows," says brother Dominic, with not a little awe. "With my background in criminal law, I tend to react aggressively and want to bang on the table. Angela will just lean over and say, 'Calm down.' She recognizes the issues quickly and pinpoints what to do to help clients solve those issues and move on with their lives."

"She is calm amid chaos, both personal and professional," says sister Dominique. "That's sort of her role in our family, too. She's the peacemaker. She has a very big heart. Her clients at first like her, and then they trust her."

Dominique also recognizes that such emotion can be hard on a big heart.

"I do estate planning, so if I get called by a client in tears, it usually means there's been a death *in* the family," says Dominique. "If Angela gets a client in tears, it usually means there's been the death *of* a family."

It certainly felt like death when the wife of a man whose first name is Joe filed for divorce after 26 years of marriage. Together they had reared three daughters into adulthood.

"I'm 64," says Joe, who lives outside the Chicago area. "I didn't really see it coming this late in my life. It has been a very unhappy time for me, but Angela has helped get me kick-started in life again, to see light at the end of the tunnel."

Because his soon-to-be ex-wife's father was a well-known attorney where Joe lives, he chose to look for an attorney outside that area.

"A friend told me about Angela, so I called her," he says. "That one call was all it took. She was professional and caring, and that was important to me."

Their relationship has only continued to grow.

"She's smart and compassionate," he says. "She's honest and conscientious. She's always available. I've even texted her late at night and gotten a reply. And she pays attention to detail."

Joe says he and Buttitta have had long conversations both about the history of his marriage and his future.

"I've had a number of conversations with

Angela about what lies ahead,” he says. “They started me thinking in a different way.”

The two of them also have spent a good deal of time talking about his relationships with his daughters, relationships that he says his wife worked diligently to undermine.

“Angela told me it would be hard, but that once the divorce was over, it would get better,” he says. “She urged me to imagine what they were going through, just to love them and focus on them.”

He says his relationship with his 20-year-old twins seems to be thawing now, as his divorce nears its resolution. His 24-year-old daughter remains cool toward him. But through it all, he has depended on Buttitta.

“I felt like I had someone to trust, to count on,” he says. “I felt like I had a friend — and an excellent attorney. I think it’s quite likely we’ll continue to have a relationship past this point in my life.”

Late-Night Ghosts

While she might make handling the volatile emotions that course through almost every family law case look easy, Buttitta says there are cases that haunt her still.

“Child custody cases keep me up at night,” says Buttitta, pointing to one in particular that roiled her emotions and still does, five years after its resolution.

“I had a client who was severely bipolar, with personality issues and a 9-year-old daughter,” says Buttitta. “Sometimes she couldn’t remember a phone call we’d had just the day before, and sometimes she’d have an outburst in court. But I really liked her and felt for her situation.”

The woman had just recently lost her father and brother, and Buttitta understood that losing her marriage and her daughter on top of those deaths would be devastating. Nonetheless, the custody evaluation recommended against the woman having custody.

“The judge gave custody to the husband,” says Buttitta. “She brought her daughter to the courthouse that day and had to leave without her.”

Buttitta admits grudgingly that the judge probably made the best decision at the time for the child involved.

“Yes, it may have been the right decision, but I couldn’t just abandon her,” says Buttitta. As a result of the case, Buttitta says the woman got treatment for her bipolar disorder and “eventually won the right to have her daughter visit overnight. It must be working, because I haven’t heard from her in a while.”

But it remains a case that rattles around in her head late at night.

Another divorce/custody case that intrigues her for entirely different reasons

is still active.

“Our client lives here now with her daughter, but the case was originally filed in New York,” says Buttitta of the case on which Dominic is co-counsel. The husband still lives in New York. They filed to have the custody issues transferred to Illinois, and the request was granted.

“That means the financial part of the case was being ruled on in New York, while the custody half was being ruled on here,” says Buttitta, who found the two-state case an interesting challenge. “But the New York attorneys were great. We had the benefit of them being willing to negotiate, of them wanting to be reasonable.”

There’s that “R” word again.

If only her own client had exuded a bit more of it. She and Dominic had negotiated a custody arrangement whereby the father was allotted six visits with his daughter per year, to be held in Illinois, and with the father responsible for all costs incurred. They were shocked when the mother objected.

“She didn’t want any visitation at all,” says Buttitta, who eventually helped convince their client that such an approach was both unreasonable and unlikely to prevail in court.

Clients can frustrate in other ways, too. A client telling her lies is at the top of her list. A client who doesn’t take her advice to get off social media during the case is another irritant.

But Buttitta also wants to make sure that financial issues don’t deter a client from calling her. To that end, she does not bill them for phone calls when they call to find out what is going on with their case.

“I want them to feel comfortable enough to do that because, quite honestly, it’s just good business,” she says. “There is so much emotion in family law. Most come in when they are in a desperate situation and have no idea where to start with their divorce.”

But dealing with such raw emotion also can lead to equal levels of satisfaction.

“You get a real sense of helping clients,” says Buttitta. “I love what I do because I know I can make a difference every single day.”

The proof, she says, is on her office wall.

“I have an entire wall of thank-you letters I’ve received from clients,” says Buttitta. “I even received letters from both the husband and the wife in one case. That’s why I do it.”

And then she smiles, as if she simply can’t wait for the next beleaguered client to walk in the door so she can add them to her many families and lead them back into the light. ■