

PROFILE / GAY GRUNFELD

THRIVING AFTER A BREAK FROM THE LAW

Leslie A. Gordon



Gay Grunfeld (second from left) and her children with their stepfather Carl Grunfeld and beloved dog Bandit, 2011

It would be impressive enough to be named one of the top seventy-five women litigators of 2011 by the *Daily Journal* or to be made a name partner in a long-established firm. But Gay Grunfeld managed to accomplish these achievements after taking eight years off from law practice to raise her children. Now a partner at Rosen Bien Galvan & Grunfeld, employment and civil rights litigator Grunfeld talks about how she not only seamlessly returned to law but went on to thrive.

WHAT WAS THE TRANSITION FROM WORK TO PARENTING LIKE?

While I was at home with three young kids, including one sick with lead poisoning, I worked sitting in my laundry room volunteering as president of the San Francisco Women Lawyers Alliance. I also edited a gender bias report (*Achieving Equal Justice for Women and Men in the Courts*) for the Judicial Council because I care deeply about gender equality.

HOW DID YOU GET BACK INTO PRACTICE?

I had to return to work after my divorce. My youngest was in first grade and my older kids were ten and twelve. I tried to get work as a government lawyer, but they didn't believe I could go from full-time mom to working again. So I was sent by Robert Half Legal to be a "Kelly Girl" lawyer at a small firm. I fell in with a really great litigator who'd tried seventy-five cases and needed a good researcher and writer. It was a small suburban firm that did trusts and estate litigation, real estate disputes, and accounts payable. I was soon hired as an associate. I worked with him for four years and tried two jury trials.

WHAT WAS REENTRY LIKE?

Getting ready to take my first deposition in ten years, I was so terrified. My father, a heart surgeon, told me, "You can do this. You'll be prepared and most of those guys haven't even read the papers," which he knew from being an expert witness. I was shaky at first, but hundreds of depositions later, it feels like second nature again. Going back into a very specialized arena, I had to work at getting that confidence.

HOW DID YOU END UP AT YOUR CURRENT FIRM, OF WHICH YOU WERE RECENTLY MADE A NAME PARTNER?

After four years, I remarried and was looking to move back to the city. I wanted to go back into public interest law. It was always my goal from early on to use law to make a difference. I'm from Waco, Texas, and I grew up amid tremendous racial discrimination and I lived through the desegregation of the Texas schools. I wrote to Sandy Rosen to see if he'd hire me.

YOUR KIDS ARE NOW EIGHTEEN, TWENTY-TWO, AND TWENTY-FOUR. WHAT IS THE STATUS OF WORKING MOMS IN THE LAW THESE DAYS?

We've made great improvements getting women into the law, but the problem today remains promoting women in the law. Women constitute only 15 to 19 percent of equity partnerships.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR WOMEN LAWYERS WHO ARE ALSO MOTHERS?

Try to stay in as long as you can. In the long run, it makes it easier. Consider part time, flex time. Use technology to communicate and make yourself available at night and on the weekends. When my youngest was nine, I couldn't reach our house by phone one day. I had to jump in a taxi to check on everything. It was very disruptive. Today, with email, texts, video, and smartphones—a lot has changed. Find people who appreciate you and will take a long view. Your career is long.



Gay Grunfeld with children from left, Evie, William, and Bobby Danforth, 1999