

Vikki Ziegler: Helping Divorcing Couples Untie Knot
NJBIZ 40 Under 40: Ten years later

By Gabrielle Saulsberry, September 17, 2018 at 3:00 AM

Vikki Ziegler doesn't flinch in front of the camera. The Wayne native and divorce and family law attorney has made upward of 2,000 television appearances in the last decade, providing expert commentary on high-profile divorce cases and starring on the Bravo reality TV series "Untying the Knot."

When Ziegler was chosen 10 years ago as one of NJBIZ's 40 Under 40 people to watch, the then-31-year-old had been working at the law firm Walder Hayden & Brogan PA for five years. Two years earlier, a friend of a friend who worked for Fox News met her at a party and asked why she wasn't on TV.

"I said I wasn't interested and that I didn't think it was real," Ziegler said. "But I gave them my card and the next day I was on ['The O'Reilly Factor'] talking about [the custody aspects of] Britney Spears' divorce when she shaved her head. That started my TV bug."

While networks such as CNN, CBS, CNBC, and HLN were calling on her for commentary on the legalities of love lost, Ziegler was on a partnership track at Walder Hayden, and two years later became the youngest partner at the firm.

"I'm a 'yes' person, always wanting to learn [and] seize opportunities. The partner I worked for acknowledged that, and I was billing a lot of the time, and they saw I was invested in the firm," she said.

Five years ago, Ziegler started her own firm, Ziegler & Zemsky LLC. She'd been tapped by Bravo for "Untying the Knot," where she helped real couples divvy up their assets through mediation rather than having the courts do it for them. Between work and filming, she wasn't sure if she could produce the way Walder Hayden needed her to.

"I'm an entrepreneur at heart. I thought, 'let me go try my own thing and die on my own vine if I have to, but I'm going to work hard at developing my TV career and my own platform and clientele,'" Ziegler said.

At the time, Ziegler & Zemsky had two lawyers and a paralegal. Now, they're up to nearly 20 employees covering almost exclusively matrimonial law, and they're looking to hire more.

"We run the gamut from the housewives that stay home to the housewives that are on TV. We represent everyone in between — men, women, police officers, celebrities, business owners, stay-at-home moms and dads, same-sex couples getting divorced. ... We have lawyers that can serve anyone," she said of her firm, now Ziegler, Zemsky & Resnick.

Though she wouldn't name any of her current clients, she and her former partner represented former New York Giants star-turned TV personality Michael Strahan in his highly publicized 2006 divorce. Through sports circles and TV appearances, she's met and represented other high-net worth clients, though she doesn't shoo away your average Joes.

"People are people, and they need help through difficult times," Ziegler said. Even if it's not her, she

said, there's someone at her firm to represent just about anyone.

Ziegler herself has been married, divorced and married again, this time for six years to Bill Payne, a real estate agent and co-founder of boutique aviation firm B2 Aviation. She and Payne share 3-year-old daughter Sofia.

Although she admits it's a challenge to not take her work home with her, she credits a path of personal growth for allowing her to be her best as a wife and mother.

"Reading about [personal growth], learning how to problem solve and say sorry ... I think that's been the key to my healthy marriage, my healthy relationships and me still striving to help my clients," she said.

Her mantra is "divorce with dignity" — no backbiting, no talking about the case with the children, making sure all parties are on the same financial playing field.

"It's taking a divorce case and trying to resolve the matter in a professional manner," she said. "A lot of times I do that out of the courtroom with experts, which helps them bolt their own deal, instead of a judge deciding for them how their case will be dissolved — and hopefully saving fees along the way."

Ziegler's specialty is creative settlements. Though she loves the courtroom, 65 percent of her work is done mediating behind closed doors, she said, where "we have more flexibility to do things that a judge can't order. A judge has to look at the rules and case law and rule accordingly."

Whether that's getting a buyout of alimony, reducing the amount and offsetting it against another asset or compelling a trust to pay child support and making another party put a life insurance trust together, Ziegler likes to look outside the box to sculpt nontraditional deals that are within the confines of the law.

Ziegler also nabbed a Gracie Award two years ago for her podcast "Hollywood Hookups and Breakups," where she chatted with celebrities such as Alyssa Milano and "Mob Wives" star Renee Graziano about their experiences in love and family matters. Even after years of TV appearances and even more practicing matrimonial law, Ziegler's deep interest in relationships continues to cross over into her personal time.

"I think I'm kind of obsessed with relationships and problem-solving," she said. "I enjoy understanding how people are raised and what kind of family and how they enter into these relationships. How come love turns to hate sometimes? I feel very compelled to continue to learn and read about relationships for myself professionally and personally."