

*The Women of Meyer, Olson, Lowy & Meyers Bring  
Compassion & Tenacity to Family Law*

LOS ANGELES'

# Women Leaders in the Law<sup>®</sup>

2010



*Deborah Chang On*  
**Women Representing  
Women in  
Personal Injury Cases**



*Stacy Phillips On*  
**Los Angeles  
Superior Court  
Closures**



*Amy Solomon of Girardi | Keese*  
**On How Strong Will  
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**Los Angeles Times**

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# Amy Fisch Solomon

When Amy Fisch Solomon came aboard storied firm Girardi | Keese as the firm's first woman attorney back in 1989, the precedent that was set was a mere sign of things to come. The firm now proudly boasts several women attorneys, nine members of the American Board of Trial Advocates (including Ms. Solomon), and an expanding Intellectual Property and Business practice, which have been buoyed by the recent addition of former federal judge Steven Larson to the firm's ranks. Girardi | Keese is also proud to have current partner Howard Miller serving as President of the State Bar of California, working to streamline resources and sharpen the public's perception of the bar.

**In the past year, Ms. Solomon has been honored with two accolades that have** provided testament to her devotion to the legal community: the Distinguished Alumna Award from Loyola Law School, and the Ted Horn Memorial Award, which the Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles gives to an individual who offers "the selfless gift of one's talents" to their community of fellow trial lawyers. Both commendations come at the behest of Ms. Solomon's peers in recognition of her work as a mentor for younger generations of attorneys, particularly those who are interested in becoming trial lawyers.

**"There still are not a lot of role models for women law students who want to** become plaintiff's lawyers. Although both women and men have unique individual qualities, and both work well, I like to give women some extra encouragement because there aren't as many opportunities for them," says Ms. Solomon.

**This current mentoring phase of her career coincides with her duties in heading up** litigation for the firm against Bayer who manufactures the birth control pill Yaz—a drug which is causing severe injuries to young women.

**Indeed, Girardi | Keese has handled several large pharmaceutical cases including** Vioxx, for which Tom Girardi was able to negotiate a \$4.85 billion settlement on behalf of those injured by the drug.

**Specializing in the areas of professional liability, toxic torts, products liability,** and insurance bad faith, Ms. Solomon has obtained numerous seven and eight figure verdicts and settlements on behalf of her clients, and is on the executive committee of the Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles, where she is also a past-president.

**In addition to the advice she provides to law students and associates, Ms. Solomon's** passions are also channeled into her twelve-year residence on the Board of Governors of the Consumer Attorneys of California, which concentrates on preservation of the civil justice system and making sure that all voices, not just big business, have a say in government. "That's what lawyers are here for, to provide legal access and help for the public. It's about making sure that access to justice is always available to all citizens," says Ms. Solomon.



*"It's about  
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Los Angeles Office:  
1126 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90017  
Ph: 213.977.0211 Fax: 213.481.1554  
San Bernardino Office:  
155 W. Hospitality Lane, Suite 260  
San Bernardino, CA 92408  
Ph: 909.381.1551 Fax: 909.381.2566  
[www.girardikeese.com](http://www.girardikeese.com)



Amy Cantrell

# Deborah Chang

**W**hen Deborah Chang first started her work in the products liability arena more than twenty years ago, she found a conspicuous lack of other women. Though some may believe that it has persisted as a male-dominated area, Ms. Chang has remained at the forefront of products liability litigation, and has watched as more and more women have joined her in the practice, and excelled. "Women are very good at piecing the whole story together. They have the patience to learn the product from the bottom up, and they listen to the client to see where the failure occurred—what should happen, and what actually did happen," says Ms. Chang.

**Since joining legendary personal injury firm Panish Shea & Boyle LLP** in 2008, Ms. Chang has continued to attend every single one of the same product inspections associated with her cases that first piqued her products liability interest at the start of her career. Not even the passage of two decades of time can dull Ms. Chang's innate curiosity towards the facts of her cases; the more she gathers, the richer the story becomes. "I think I learn something new every time I go to a product inspection with an expert. Every accident or incident is different, and I want to know exactly where every failure occurred. Instead of hunks of twisted metal, you have a totally compelling drama, and you can make the jury understand it better," says Ms. Chang.

**Now, as Panish Shea & Boyle LLP gears up for its work in cases involving** the Toyota/Lexus recalls and other automotive and tire defects, Ms. Chang finds those habits she developed early on defending other automobile manufacturers for over twenty years to be invaluable in helping to reconcile the complex engineering concepts that lie behind the cases. Her knowledge and experience in accident investigation, reconstruction, vehicle dynamics, and attention to detail are especially important in cases involving cars that have been used and enjoyed by jurors on an every-day basis.

**She is currently representing victims with catastrophic injuries resulting** from sudden unintended accelerations in Toyota and Lexus vehicles. In one case, a pedestrian on a sidewalk was struck by an out-of-control accelerating Lexus and tragically lost her right leg in an above-the-knee amputation. In other cases, the vehicles suddenly and unexpectedly accelerated into light poles or trees, causing significant and traumatic injuries and deaths. "We receive numerous calls every single day from people from all walks of life—including a judge—who have experienced problems with their Toyota or Lexus vehicles." In these types of claims, or as in her recent case involving a defective personal watercraft that exploded, every aspect of the product and the incident must be investigated, reconstructed, and broken down into understandable components in order to convince the jury that the product was unreasonably dangerous and defective.

**The work required grows even more exponentially when going up** against a large manufacturer such as Toyota, and there are few firms that have the resources and expertise to put the pieces together. "Very good attorneys from all over the country come to us because products liability cases can be costly, time-consuming, and require the attorney to be deeply entrenched in



the science, terminology, and engineering of the case." According to Ms. Chang, Panish Shea & Boyle is devoted to working with the best experts and putting the story together using the most effective technology. Its attorneys have the requisite experience and are willing to do the necessary work, sit with the experts, and ask the questions necessary to take the product apart and put the science together in a way that makes sense to the judge and jury. Over the years, these attorneys have obtained the largest automobile products liability verdict in history (\$4.9 billion), the largest tire defect verdict



*“Every accident or incident is different, and I want to know exactly where every failure occurred.”*

in history (\$56 million), the largest single-victim personal injury verdict in California history (\$58 million), and the largest known verdicts and settlement in aviation disaster cases.

**“You can bet that by the time we depose the manufacturer’s employees or experts in any of these types of cases, we will know the product, its component parts, the correct terminology, and the engineering just as well as whoever we are deposing,”** says Ms. Chang.

**PANISH  
SHEA &  
BOYLE**  
LLP

11111 Santa Monica Blvd.  
Suite 700  
Los Angeles, CA 90025  
Ph: 310.477.1700  
Fax: 310.477.1699  
[www.psblaw.com](http://www.psblaw.com)

# LOS ANGELES' **Women Leaders** **in the** **Law**<sup>®</sup> 2010

In recognition of Women's History Month, we proudly present the second annual Los Angeles' Women Leaders in the Law. More and more firms, such as those featured in this section, are making the commitment to hiring and retaining women attorneys. Their commitment to these efforts and the women featured in this section is both noteworthy and needed. Should you ever be in need of an attorney, the women profiled here represent the many in Los Angeles that are out there waiting to represent you.

We expect to continue to improve this section in years to come and would appreciate any feedback. Please feel free to contact Jason Leder via e-mail at [jleder@alm.com](mailto:jleder@alm.com) with any comments or suggestions.

## Janet E. Dockstader

**A** total commitment to aggressive representation and strong advocacy has brought Brandmeyer, Stanton & Dockstader to the forefront of the family law arena. As a result of a 2008 merger between the law firms Brandmeyer & Stanton and Janet E. Dockstader, the new firm has created a strong platform to provide clients a commitment to resolving their issues in a manner most beneficial to their needs.

Brian Brandmeyer has a financial background in accounting that enables him to guide strategies and resolve complex financial areas of marital dissolutions. Janet Dockstader began her career providing defense in criminal cases, learning the strategies needed in courtroom litigation. In addition to handling property issues, Dockstader has an edge when handling custody disputes and domestic violence issues. However, when clients desire to avoid litigation altogether, Dockstader has a collaborative practice allowing her to represent clients in a more relaxed and friendly setting.

Brandmeyer and Dockstader are complimented by the firms experienced associates Wendy Tse and John Bachmayer. Tse's writing and briefing skills are key ingredients of the firm's success, as is Bachmayer's 30 years of litigation success. The firm's representation covers all areas of family law services including advice, strategy, negotiations, mediation, and trials, as well as domestic violence cases, prenuptials, and collaborative representation. Clients of Brandmeyer, Stanton & Dockstader praises the collective teamwork available to them in strategy, preparations, negotiations, and trials. Clients also have the benefit of an experienced, friendly, and technologically adept staff that is committed to consistently achieving successful results. For some, the most important factor is the firm's open communication with their clients. The firm also features fluency in Spanish and Chinese.



**Brandmeyer Stanton  
& Dockstader**  
One World Trade Center  
Suite 1940  
Long Beach, CA 90831  
Ph: 562.499.2131  
Fax: 562.499.2132  
[www.brandmeyerlaw.com](http://www.brandmeyerlaw.com)

# Meyer, Olson, Lowy & Meyers, LLP

**A**s the preeminent female-owned family law firm in Los Angeles, Meyer, Olson, Lowy & Meyers, LLP is proud to bring its highly aggressive and focused representation to high net worth individuals in California and out-of-state jurisdictions. The boutique firm, located in Century City, specializes in all aspects of family law, including complex marital dissolutions, high conflict custody matters, pre- and post-nuptial agreements, and mediation.

**Having worked within the family law community for over 25 years**, Meyer, Olson, Lowy & Meyers maintains excellent relationships with colleagues, consultants, and the judicial bar. Under the guidance of the four name partners—Lisa Helfend Meyer, Doreen Marie Olson, Dana Lowy, and Felicia R. Meyers—the firm employs a team approach in developing case strategy and goals, including the client in its preparation from the outset. The firm regularly collaborates with numerous experts in related fields and is able to call upon a long list of the country's most knowledgeable authorities in order to further advocate and advance its clients' cases and rights.

**This attention to detail complements the firm's unique ability** to see a case through to conclusion, regardless of its challenges. The firm's partners and many associates are seasoned negotiators and trial lawyers, giving them the versatility to resolve a case by way of mediation or trial. This catalog of experience also provides a rare insight into the motivation and strategy of the opposing side.

**Whereas many firms become daunted by difficult facts** of a case or the goals of the client, Meyer, Olson, Lowy & Meyers refuses to give up. This passion and strength are the reasons its attorneys are often called in to take over cases in midstream. At a time when many individual clients begin to resign themselves to loss of pride, marital assets, or even custody, the firm is able to change the entire tenor of a case and achieve what may at that point seem to the client and others to be "the impossible dream." "We put our heart and soul into each case to develop a strategy that will work towards that goal," says Meyer.



**MOLM**

MEYER, OLSON, LOWY & MEYERS, LLP  
FAMILY LAW

10100 Santa Monica Blvd Suite 1425  
Los Angeles, CA 90067  
Ph: 310.277.9747  
[www.mol famlaw.com](http://www.mol famlaw.com)

# Amy Solomon of Girardi | Keese On How Strong Will Helped Her Succeed



lot has changed for women in law since Amy Solomon joined Girardi Keese in 1989.

Solomon remembers walking into a courtroom and being the only woman in the room. Judges called her “honey” and “darling” on a regular basis. More than once, she was told to sit down and be quiet, or leave the room entirely and wait outside.

“I politely declined those invitations,” Solomon says, with a laugh. “But I always worked hard to maintain composure and professionalism.”

Instead of getting angry, Solomon focused on using her voice on behalf of injured people.

“During law school, I learned very quickly that tort law was the great equalizer,” she says. “When companies put people at risk, it’s people like me who hold these companies accountable.”

Since earning her JD from Loyola Law School in 1987, Solomon has specialized in professional liability cases, toxic torts, product liability and insurance bad faith cases. She served as the third woman president of the Consumer Attorneys Association of Los Angeles (CAALA) in 2008. CAALA honored Solomon with the Ted Horn award in 2009.

Solomon has successfully tried more than two dozen jury and bench trials in state and federal courts. The talented trial lawyer has obtained numerous seven- and eight-figure verdicts and settlements on behalf of her clients.

Solomon’s most life-changing case came in 2000. During a family trip, a 4-year-old boy was

seriously injured on a ride at a theme park. After falling from a car on the ride, the boy was pinned beneath another car on the ride and suffered severe damage to his brain, liver and spleen. He could no longer walk or talk.

In 2002, Solomon negotiated a \$43 million settlement that allowed the boy to receive proper medical care at his parents’ home. The key to winning the case was the little boy himself.

“He was one of the most special little guys I ever had the pleasure of knowing,” Solomon says. “There was something about the look in his eyes. I knew that his spirit was alive and well the first time I met him in the hospital. He grabbed my heart without a word or touch.”

The case led the park to close the ride for 10 months. The ride was completely revamped with new sensor mechanisms and better loading and unloading procedures, among other safety changes.

“That case was definitely a professional victory, especially going against such a formidable opponent,” Solomon says. “They fought all the way. It was a really hard fight.”

According to several news articles, the theme park’s general counsel denied that the injury was due to any negligence or wrongdoing.

The injured boy passed away in 2009. Solomon says that she will never forget him or his case.

Standing up for those who can’t stand up for themselves is part of leadership, Solomon says.

“I enjoy rallying the troops



Amy Cantrell

*“So many people can’t fight for themselves. I’m delighted that I can fill that role for so many.”*

— Amy Solomon

and forging ahead,” she says. “I especially love helping young attorneys develop professionally as attorneys and leaders.”

Solomon enjoys mentoring female law students at her alma mater.

“Young law students who don’t have mentors are kind of like a child without a parent. Mentors are essential,” Solomon says. “Mentorship can open doors, and remove learning curves. In many cases, I learn more from the mentee than they learn from me. Their creative approaches to cases are enlightening.”

Mentorship initiatives and professional associations catering to women lawyers have helped women attorneys succeed, Solomon says.

“I’m inspired to see so many bright, talented women graduating from law schools these days,” she says. “Judges have also done a much greater

job diversifying their ranks. These efforts do a lot to equalize the environment for all lawyers.”

Yet, there’s still more work to be done, Solomon says. Women are still underrepresented in the trial lawyer community.

“There are a lot of different theories as to why this is true, and it’s something I speak about with my colleagues. One belief is that trial law is a combative kind of environment, because it’s been so heavily dominated by men. But women can come in and resolve conflicts in their own way,” Solomon says.

Solomon attributes her success as a woman lawyer to her strong will.

“I’m a tough cookie, and have a desire to do nothing but good,” she says. “So many people can’t fight for themselves. I’m delighted that I can fill that role for so many.”

—Ashley Cisneros

## Azita Avedessian | Grace Jamra | Stacy Phillips



Grace Jamra

Azita Avedessian

Stacy D. Phillips

Amy Cantrell

Phillips, Lerner, Lauzon & Jamra, LLP (PLLJ) has recently embarked upon uncharted waters. While continuing to represent their clients in complex and highly contested marital dissolution proceedings, the firm is raising awareness concerning the closure of California courtrooms resulting from the state's budget crisis.

If the current course is left uncorrected, it will result in the closure of over 180 courtrooms by 2013, which encompass nearly half the Court's civil, family and juvenile courtrooms, including 14 of the 43 family law courtrooms in Los Angeles County alone.

Presiding Judge Charles W. McCoy, Jr., is working tirelessly to help lawyers understand just how dire the situation is, and how bad it can get. "Guess what—it's going to affect the lawyers, and that affects the tax base, and it's all a vicious circle. But most importantly, it affects our children," says Stacy D. Phillips. Consequently, Stacy D. Phillips, Grace A. Jamra, Azita Avedessian, Ram F. Cogan, and their colleagues at PLLJ have jumped on the wagon with full force.

PLLJ has authored articles in legal publications such as the *Daily Journal* and the *Century City Bar Newsletter*, and given speeches at venues

such as the AFCC Statewide Conference. PLLJ is also co-sponsoring (with Phillips & Jesner) an event on behalf of Levitt & Quinn where Presiding Judge McCoy has been invited to speak on this critical issue.

PLLJ is also working to highlight the disproportionate impact of the court closures on the most vulnerable members of our society; children, victims of domestic violence and the elderly. "It would not be an exaggeration to say that litigants will go unprotected facing risk of personal physical or financial harm to themselves or their children. Limited or no access to the courts will not provide individuals with timely and/or much needed relief," says Grace A. Jamra.

"The consequences are staggering when you consider that the health, safety and welfare of millions of children in California are directly affected by the unavailability of a civil forum to protect and provide for them," says Phillips.

"As officers of the court and advocates for our clients we have an ongoing obligation to speak for those who have no voice to protect themselves and work cooperatively to find solutions to the current crisis. "Justice delayed is truly justice denied," says Azita Avedessian.

### PHILLIPS, LERNER, LAUZON & JAMRA LLP

2029 Century Park East, Suite 1200  
Los Angeles, CA 90067

Tel: 310.277.7117 Fax: 310.286.9182 • [www.plljlaw.com](http://www.plljlaw.com)



# *The Women of Meyer, Olson, Lowy & Meyers Bring Compassion & Tenacity to Family Law*

**G**eneral George Patton said, "Accept the challenges so that you may feel the exhilaration of victory." That quote epitomizes the philosophy of the women-owned family law firm of Meyer, Olson, Lowy & Meyers.

A custody case they recently handled is a perfect example of the kind of so-called "impossible" case on which the lawyers at this firm thrive. Partners Lisa Helfend Meyer and Felicia R. Meyers, with associate Erica A. Swensson, represented a father seeking custody of his daughter. Although everything was going against the father initially, they were able to get him custody through their "extraordinary efforts," passion and aggressiveness, says Meyers.

The first challenge posed by the case was geographical. Meyer explains that both parents originally lived in Colorado. The mother, with whom the daughter primarily lived at the time, moved to California, while the father eventually moved out of state. The case was ultimately resolved in a Denver court.

Because the custody dispute was tried in Colorado, these California lawyers had to learn that state's laws and procedures and try the case in an unfamiliar court. In addition, the fact the father was not living in California meant they did not have much face-to-face time with their client, seeing him only when he came to California for monthly visits with his daughter, says Meyer.

The case posed substantive challenges, too. The initial psychological evaluations

expressed concerns about the mother. Nonetheless, they recommended that the six-year-old child stay in the mother's custody as that was with whom she had been primarily living.

Meyers believes that a bias in the system toward mothers played a major role in those recommendations. As Swensson explains, they are used to handling cases in California, which is more progressive on fathers' rights than Colorado.

Despite these evaluations, the lawyers strongly believed in their client. But to prove their case, they had to establish that the daughter would be better off in his custody, which was difficult, explains Swensson, because there was no abuse or alcohol/drug use. Meyers says the mother was involving the daughter in the dispute. For example, the mother was trying to influence the child against her father by making negative statements about him in her presence, says Meyer. Ferreting out these subtleties and effectively presenting them to the court required "tenacity and an eye for detail," notes Swensson.

However, presenting a case like this one would only be successful before a court that was receptive to these kinds of arguments. Meyer explains that if you have "an intelligent judge who's willing to listen to the evidence," you can prevail. Luckily, the case was eventually



Amy Cantrell

decided by such a judge, who was impressed with how the lawyers presented the case and themselves, adds Meyers.

Trying the case required the team to essentially move to Colorado for two weeks of intensive preparation, says Meyers. But they were happy to do so. These cases are difficult and "emotionally draining," she explains. Meyer adds that you get to know your clients so well and believe in their cases. So it is "wonderful when you win; horrible when you lose," she says.

Meyers says they never wavered in their belief in the father's case, but they did have doubts that they would win because of the "many roadblocks and obstacles" they faced. But nearly two years after they took the case, the court ruled that it was in "the daughter's best interests to live primarily with her father," says Meyer. The mother now sees the child once a month for a week.

*"You get to know your clients so well and believe in their cases . . . it is wonderful when you win."*

*—Lisa Helfend Meyer*

Why was the firm successful? Swensson believes that it is because they were able to balance their emotional investment in the case with objectivity, noting that you need "a healthy perspective to be a zealous advocate." You must be passionate but you cannot personalize the case, warns Meyers. She adds that although they are aggressive and tenacious, they also "bring compassion and extraordinary competence and trial skills" to the table.

With challenging cases come great rewards. The daughter, who had been having problems in school in California, is now doing well, participating in extracurricular activities, making friends and integrating into the community, notes Meyer. Swensson says she "felt like we saved a little girl." Meyer agrees, saying "we changed the course of this child's life."

*—Robin L. Barton*

## Cynthia E. Gitt

**C**ynthia E. Gitt is Founder and Principal Partner in the Brown Gitt Law Group LLP where she represents employers of all sizes (private, public and non-profit sectors) in all aspects of labor and employment litigation, including wrongful termination, sexual harassment, disability and all other discrimination litigation, ERISA, trade secrets, unfair labor practices, union organizing activity and represents individuals in business litigation and security-related disputes.

Prior to founding Brown Gitt Law Group LLP in 2006, Ms. Gitt was a shareholder and Of Counsel to Epstein Becker & Green (1991-2006), a partner with Ford & Harrison (1984-1991), and an associate at Morgan Lewis & Bockius (1978-1984). Prior to entering private practice in 1978, Ms. Gitt was an assistant professor of law and director of the EEOC-funded Employment Discrimination Clinic at Wayne State University Law School (1975 to 1977) and a trial attorney for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Washington, DC from 1971 to 1974 and in San Francisco from 1974 to 1975. Ms. Gitt has been named a Super Lawyer by Los Angeles magazine for 2004-2010.



### Brown Gitt Law Group LLP

300 North Lake Avenue, Suite 200  
Pasadena, CA 91101  
Ph: 800.917.1289 Fax: 626.229.1917  
[www.browngett.com](http://www.browngett.com)

## Linda S. Klibanow

**L**inda S. Klibanow provides labor and employment law arbitration, mediation and investigative services. For 30+ years Ms. Klibanow has specialized exclusively in the practice of labor and employment law. Following 20+ years with the LA firm Parker Milliken where she represented management and started her neutral practice, in 2000 Ms. Klibanow established her own firm in Pasadena representing individuals, smaller employers and labor organizations. In recent years she has focused her practice on neutral work as an arbitrator with American Arbitration Association, mediator with AAA and ARC, EEOC contract mediator, LA County Civil Service Commission hearing officer and independent employment investigator. A graduate of Harvard College and Yale Law School, Ms. Klibanow has arbitrated complex multiparty disputes and mediated employment disputes which parties considered "beyond resolution." Participants in her mediations describe her as "extremely effective," "knowledge of employment... second to nobody's," "diplomatic," "even-handed," "tenacious," "tireless," with ample reserves of "patience and perseverance." She recently relocated her offices to the historical Bank of the West Building in Pasadena, offering conference rooms with scenic views.



### Law Offices of Linda S. Klibanow

595 E. Colorado Boulevard, Suite 302  
Pasadena, CA 91101  
Ph: 626.204.4000 Fax: 626.204.4001  
[www.lsklaw-adr.com](http://www.lsklaw-adr.com)  
[lklibanow@lsklaw-adr.com](mailto:lklibanow@lsklaw-adr.com)

## Carol Gillam

**E**MPLOYMENT LITIGATION:  
PLAINTIFF, LABOR  
& EMPLOYMENT

**C**RIMINAL DEFENSE:  
WHITE COLLAR



**C**arol Gillam started her career at large firms including Irell and Manella, then became Assistant United States Attorney, Criminal Division, specializing in civil rights, environmental crimes, government fraud and public corruption cases, including a civil rights/slavery case that gained worldwide publicity. An honors graduate of Northwestern University and Loyola University of Chicago School of Law, she opened The Gillam Law Firm in 1994. She represents individuals from CEOs to low wage earners, public officials to immigrant workers, resulting in scores of six- and seven-figure jury verdicts, arbitration awards and settlements. Specialties include sex harassment, age discrimination, retaliation, whistleblower, disability and religion cases. She negotiates complex compensation and severance packages for executives and handles trade secret, privacy, workplace violence and other challenging issues. Carol speaks and writes on trial skills and employment law for national and statewide audiences. She updates California Causes of Action: Employment annually and serves on the editorial board of Practical Litigator. Carol has proudly managed to raise four children during her 30+ years of practice while gaining recognition as a top lawyer unafraid to take on challenging cases.

### The Gillam Law Firm PC

1801 Century Park East, Suite 1560  
Los Angeles CA 90067  
Ph: 310.203.9977 Fax: 310.203.9922  
[www.gillamlaw.com](http://www.gillamlaw.com)  
[carol@gillamlaw.com](mailto:carol@gillamlaw.com)

## Kathleen O'Prey Truman

**K**athleen O'Prey Truman advises corporate and individual clients through the challenging maze of entitlement processes for complex land use and development projects throughout California. Employing her expertise in the California Environmental Quality Act and other environmental laws, she shepherds projects through a variety of local, state and federal agencies.

Ms. Truman offers large firm expertise with greater personalized service, tailoring an entitlement strategy to each client's expectations and circumstances. A skilled and accomplished land use lawyer, she is known for her ability to identify problems and quickly provide realistic solutions to deliver land use entitlements. "She inherited an entitlement project that had stalled for some time. Within a month, she suggested a new strategy and changes in the project design that won unanimous approvals from the City of Santa Monica and the California Coastal Commission in less than a year," offered Cory Warning, Vice President, Acquisitions and Development of Strategic Hotels & Resorts, Inc.

From film and television studios to world-renowned hotels and from mixed use developments to large residential projects, Ms. Truman efficiently and ably handles a wide variety of development projects.



### Truman & Elliott LLP

626 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 550  
Los Angeles, CA 90017  
Ph: 213.629.5300 Fax: 213.629.1212  
[www.trumanelliott.com](http://www.trumanelliott.com)  
[ktruman@trumanelliott.com](mailto:ktruman@trumanelliott.com)

## Toni Jaramilla

**T**oni Jaramilla is an employment attorney who is well known for being a fierce, yet compassionate advocate for workers in discrimination, harassment, retaliation, wrongful termination, and unpaid wage lawsuits.

With her convictions for social justice, she has successfully litigated hundreds of employment discrimination cases in state and federal court for approximately 15 years. She is well respected in the legal community and has earned numerous awards and commendations since the start of her legal career.

Her life experiences have shaped her path towards a career in equal rights. As a young lawyer, she was president of the Philippine American Bar Association and was profiled in the front page of the LA Daily Journal, "Bar President is Feisty Advocate" (October 6, 1998).

In 2004, she was selected Chair of the State Bar Labor and Employment Law Section after serving as an Executive Board member for several years and is now an Advisor.

Currently, she is a Board Member of the California Employment Lawyers Association and Chair of its Diversity Outreach Committee which establishes scholarships and educational programs to increase cultural diversity in the practice of employment law.

Local leaders have commended Ms. Jaramilla for her dedication to her community and to her clients.



### Law Offices of Toni J. Jaramilla

10100 Santa Monica Boulevard, Suite 300  
Los Angeles, CA 90067  
Ph: 310.551.3020 Fax: 310.551.3019  
[www.jaramilla.com](http://www.jaramilla.com) • [toni@tjjlaw.com](mailto:toni@tjjlaw.com)

## Rosaline L. Zukerman

**R**osaline L. Zukerman is an AV rated attorney with nearly 30 years of experience in family law. With a BA in psychology and a MA in counseling, family law was a natural progression for Roz. "In criminal law, you find the worst people at their best, and in family law, you find the best people at their worst." Family law deals with real issues that affect the future of good people who are dealing with life challenges and its potential impact on children.



Roz graduated Summa Cum Laude with a degree in Psychology from the University of Illinois and received her JD from Southwestern University School of Law in 1980. Roz draws on her experiences in being both child focused and cognizant of the financial impact of divorce. She has a team of experts to address each challenge.

An exemplary 95% settlement record has won Roz the admiration and respect of her clients and peers. If settlement isn't in the cards, Roz's experience in litigation comes into play, and her team will work tirelessly to provide a focused, effective, and aggressive approach.

# Deborah Chang of Panish Shea and Boyle On Women Representing Women in Personal Injury Cases

**F**or more than 20 years, Deborah Chang has skillfully handled cases involving complex accidents, catastrophic injuries and product defects.

One of Chang's most complex cases involved a mother of two whose life was changed forever during a field trip. Before that day, the woman enjoyed an active life as an ordained minister and teacher at a Christian school. Described as "prim and proper" and conservative, the woman planned to pursue a Ph.D. in Theology to complement her existing master's degree. When her daughter's choir planned a rehearsal trip, the woman volunteered as a chaperone. No one could have expected what happened next.

While walking to a nearby bakery to pick up the treats for the choir, the woman was struck by a bus. She hit her head on the cement, lost consciousness and suffered serious traumatic brain injuries. CT scans at the hospital revealed brain lacerations, hemorrhages, contusions and skull fractures. What was exceptional in this case, however, is that the woman made a remarkable and dramatic recovery. In fact, post-accident, there were no noticeable changes in her cognitive or motor skill functions. She appeared and spoke normally, and neuropsychological testing did not reveal significant deficits. Yet, there were some effects that the testing didn't reveal.

"When my client awoke from her coma, she was a changed person," Chang says.

This case presented a unique brain injury in which the woman's personality changes proved to be just as debilitating

as deficits in cognitive function. Proving it, however, was an enormous task — and required extensive discovery of the patient's pre-incident and post-incident personality and behaviors.

"This is an aspect of brain injury that very few attorneys have encountered. This case presented the rare situation in which we had such striking contrasts — she was minister before the accident and changed dramatically after the incident," Chang explains.

A neuropsychologist secured by Chang called it a "modern-day Phineas Gage" case referring to the 1800s railroad construction foreman who survived an accident in which a large iron rod was driven completely through his head. The injury damaged his brain's frontal lobes, causing bizarre effects on his behavior and personality.

According to documents from the litigation, post-accident, the woman fought with the nurses, became increasingly hostile and fabricated numerous stories. She refused to accept rehabilitation and treatment, threatened suicide, and ultimately fled from the hospital. She repeatedly lied under oath during a Riese hearing held to determine if she needed further care against her will. Because she presented herself so well, however, the court denied the hospital's request for involuntary hospitalization and allowed her to return home.

After her release from the hospital, the woman refused to get any treatment, medication, or care, even though she suffered from seizures, migraines, severe



*"When her defenses were down, my client realized that she was in physical and emotional pain."*

—Deborah Chang

mood swings and pain. Further, the woman became estranged from her family and exercised poor judgment in handling her finances and association with unsavory characters.

Still Chang's client refused to believe that she had a deficit.

"She took it as an insult," Chang explains. "She was raised to be a non-complainer, and wanted to show a brave front to the world. But when her defenses were down, my client realized that she was in physical and emotional pain."

Lee Thunberg served as defense counsel for the city and municipal bus company on behalf of Cihigoyenetche, Grossberg & Clouse during the case. (Thunberg is no longer with the firm.)

"Brain injury cases are a very complex type of litigation that require an enormous amount of time, energy and cost from both sides," Thunberg says. "This case reinforced the need to think outside the box."

At the request of defense counsel, the probate court ultimately appointed Mitchell I. Roth as the woman's court-

appointed conservator to represent her interests in probate court and to report to the court.

"This case was unique because it encompassed different aspects of the law including personal injury, disputes about the liability, governmental negligence, probate and conservatorship," Roth says.

Evidence proving the plaintiff's claims sometimes came from unexpected sources. The defense counsel's sometimes 24/7 surveillance of the woman gave Chang some of her best material to prove her case. Depositions of the woman's family members, co-workers and friends provided a compelling story that reflects how devastating such changes can be to the patient and her family. Chang ultimately secured a \$7 million settlement on behalf of her client in late 2009.

"This settlement means that my client can receive the medical care and support she needs. It allows her to live comfortably with her children and move on with her life," Chang says.

—Robin L. Barton

## *Stacy Phillips On*

# **Los Angeles Superior Court Closures**

**R**eacting to the California courts' funding reduction of \$393.3 million, the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) mandated court closures once a month through June 16, 2010. The effort is estimated to save \$94.3 million, according the Judicial Council public information office.

However, the savings come at a high cost. Micrometrics,

an economic research and consulting firm, found that lost court days, courtroom closures and reductions in operating capacity in the Los Angeles Superior Court, will result in a decline of \$13 billion in business activity, \$30 billion in lost output and more than 150,000 lost jobs. Even with the cuts, by 2013 the California court system is projected to have a \$139 million deficit, which could lead to the closure of more than half of Los Angeles County's civil



*"The resolution is a call to arms, and gets leaders in the community motivated."*

— Stacy Phillips

courtrooms, including a third of family law courtrooms.

Perhaps the biggest group affected by the closures is made up by California's youngest and most helpless residents—children. According to 2006 census data, there are more than 9.55 million children in California. About half are touched by the court system as a result of their

parents' divorce, separation, domestic violence, paternity, dependency or guardianship proceedings. Fewer available court dates on the calendar and fewer courtrooms themselves cause delays in cases relating to custody, child support, foster care and adoptions. Some family law attorneys and judges argue that without a civil forum to resolve these disputes, both

*Continued*

## **Debra Opri**

**A**s an attorney, television analyst, commentator, and author, Debra Opri gives legal insight to numerous newsworthy cases. No stranger to controversy, Opri is a strong advocate who regularly assumes her clients' challenges and makes them her own.

Founded by Debra Opri, Opri & Associates is a professional law corporation that handles primarily Family Law [divorce, paternity, custody/visitation, support] and Civil Litigation [including palimony & domestic violence]. Established in 1989, the firm remains dedicated to bringing the top legal expertise and personal attention to every client, at a cost that remains reasonable.

Opri & Associates' primary objective is to achieve the highest level of service and success for every client. A cornerstone of this philosophy is the focused representation of Debra Opri, whose exceptional track record over 20+ years as a litigator is a direct reflection of the expertise and passion that she brings to her work. Innovation is the hallmark of her practice.

Opri & Associates believes its obligations to the client far exceed legal advice. Each case is defined by the client's legal and financial needs, with the firm's focus on their expectations. When taking on a case, Ms. Opri provides the personalized service and care that an individual requires at this time in their life. In these challenging economic times, the law firm of Opri & Associates provides a unique opportunity to those who are unable to pay the high legal fees routinely charged by other firms.

Opri & Associates is an affordable alternative, while remaining a formidable advocate for its clients. For more information about Debra Opri, or her firm Opri & Associates, go to [www.debraopri.com](http://www.debraopri.com).



Amy Cannell

**Debra Opri / Opri & Associates**  
8383 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 830  
Beverly Hills, CA 90211  
Ph: 323.658.6774 • [www.debraopri.com](http://www.debraopri.com)

## *Stacy Phillips On Los Angeles Superior Court Closures*

*Continued*

parents and children could resort to taking matters into their own hands.

The California Chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC-CA), an interdisciplinary group for professionals dedicated to resolving family conflict, created a resolution declaring a clear and present danger to the public health of the children of in California. Judge Thomas Trent Lewis, who serves as president-elect of AFCC-CA and serves in the LA Superior Court in a Family Law assignment, says that the resolution was adopted in November 2008 when the topic was more of a chronic issue. Due to the severe financial crisis, it has now become an acute issue, he says.

The AFCC-CA is asking bar associations and other groups to adopt the resolution. It has also submitted the resolution to the Elkins Family Law Task Force, a group appointed to conduct a comprehensive review of family law proceedings and recommend proposals for improvement.

"There are more resources applied to delinquency issues than to family law," Lewis says. "But family law is the first place that children are touched by the court."

*"The consequences are staggering when you consider that the health, safety and welfare of millions of children in California are directly affected."*

— Stacy Phillips

The more than 25 signatories of the resolution make up a diverse coalition of supporters.

"Those in the coalition may have different views of what should happen in court, but they all agree that we are responsible for the lives of children and that there needs to be open courthouses to allow for family law disputes to be resolved," Lewis says.

Attorney Stacy D. Phillips of Phillips, Lerner, Lauzon, & Jamra, LLP, spoke at a

recent AFCC-CA statewide conference about the court closures' impact on the health, safety and welfare of millions of children in California. She and colleague, Ram Cogan, contributed an article about the subject published in *The Daily Journal*.

"The resolution is a call to arms, and gets leaders in the community motivated," Phillips says. "When you can't get a hearing for families for 120 days, families and children suffer. Community leaders

need to get involved and help raise money to communicate these issues to our legislators."

The AOC has reallocated \$159 million in special funds to offset, on a one-time basis, a portion of the costs associated with appointing dependency counsel for children in neglect, in addition to other programs.

Still, some members of the legal community think that more money should be reallocated from funds earmarked for a new computer system, California Court Case Management System (CCMS), and bond measure Senate Bill 1407, which finances the replacement and repair of courthouses.

"We're looking for money to keep the courts open, but simultaneously the state is considering spending on a massive new computer system. This is great and all, but where you going to put a system without a courthouse?" Phillips says. "Why build new courts when you're closing others and laying off the people who work there? The children deserve this money first."

—Ashley Cisneros

Visit <http://www.afcc-ca.org/resolution.html> to learn more about the resolution.



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**[GREENE BROILLET & WHEELER, LLP]**

# Laura Gianni



Amy Cantrel

*"I'm very proud  
of what we and  
our colleagues do"*

**F**ounded in 2004 by partners Laura Gianni and Marcus Petoyan, Gianni-Petoyan has achieved numerous multi-million dollar settlements for individuals seeking compensation for injuries in cases involving pharmaceutical products, medical devices, medical malpractice, employment discrimination, and other serious or catastrophic injury cases.

**Both partners still appreciate the tremendous satisfaction that** comes from knowing that their days are spent in the service of not just their clients, but serving a greater good. Their experience in litigating cases has time and time again been a factor in forcing pharmaceutical companies to change their labeling or withdraw unsafe drugs from the market, and insurance companies and healthcare providers change their standard of care. Not only is Gianni-Petoyan seeking compensation and justice for its clients, but they believe their actions contribute to protecting the public and saving others from the same fate as their clients. "I'm very proud of what we and our colleagues do. I know we're just a part of the big picture, but we believe litigation is certainly a large part of what motivates corporations, insurance companies, doctors, and hospitals to change their policies," says Ms. Gianni. "It's hugely important to preserve the ability for people to seek redress through the court system. If that's taken away, then the public loses an entire layer of protection," says Ms. Gianni.

**Ms. Gianni is also a firm believer in her and her partner's** responsibility to handle cases efficiently. "Every client deserves to have a lawyer who does everything in their power to move their case forward as quickly as the system allows."

**Even before the firm's inception, Ms. Gianni devoted her legal career to representing victims of catastrophic injury.** She has served on numerous state and federal committees for the litigation of pharmaceutical products cases including the Plaintiffs' Executive Committee for Ortho Evra JCCP 4506 where she was also the Assistant Plaintiffs' Liaison Counsel, Baycol JCCP 4217 & 4223 Discovery Committees, PPA MDA 1407 and JCCP 4166 Discovery Committees. In October of 2009 she was appointed to the Plaintiffs' Steering Committee for the *In re: Denture Cream Products Liability Litigation, MDL 2051* currently pending in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida, representing individuals who have suffered serious neurologic injury due to zinc toxicity from the use of denture adhesives. One company has recently voluntarily stopped the manufacture, distribution and advertising of its zinc containing denture creams because of health concerns. Her focus remains the representation of individuals who have serious injuries as a result of pharmaceutical or other dangerous products, medical malpractice, or the negligence of others.

**GIANNI ♦ PETOYAN**  
ATTORNEYS AT LAW

17383 Sunset Boulevard, Suite A200  
Pacific Palisades, CA 90272  
Ph: 310.230.6767 Fax: 310.230.6051  
[www.giannipetoyanlaw.com](http://www.giannipetoyanlaw.com)