Winter 2023

Paradigm™

President's Podium:

Relationships at heart of Primerus™ community

Canadian group helps clients navigate rules of the road

Ski options go beyond bounds of adventure

PRIMERUS™

The World's Finest Law Firms™

Embrace Equity

Soviet refugee found her legal passion in a new promised land

By Brian Cox

When attorney Karina Sterman was a young girl in Moldova, which was part of the Soviet Union at the time, she remembers her father bringing flowers home to her and her mother in celebration of International Women's Day. She remembers parades honoring March 8 as a national holiday. It was a big deal.

Years later, after her family had immigrated to the United States, she was surprised to learn few Americans had heard of International Women's Day, let alone celebrated it. On occasions at work when she brought up the idea of recognizing the holiday, she was greeted by crickets.

"How come nobody here celebrates it?" she wondered.

The irony is that International Women's Day has its roots in the U.S. The first National Women's Day was held in New York City in 1909 and attracted thousands of women, many of whom were involved in suffragist and socialist causes. The concept caught on in Europe and the first International Women's Day was organized two years later, drawing more than a million people to rallies worldwide. Today, it is celebrated in more than 100 countries and has been made an official holiday in more than 25.

"It was meant to be for people who work in order to band together and have some rights," says Sterman, a partner at Greenberg Glusker in Los Angeles. "I've always felt an affinity towards that. I very much support that."

Now, as chair of the Primerus™ Women Lawyers Section, Sterman hopes to bring more attention to the day and encourage her colleagues to take part in recognizing the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. This year's theme is "Embrace Equity."

"We shouldn't even need to have an International Women's Day because it should be so ingrained in our society that women do have equal rights and they do have equal say and they are an equal member of society," says Sterman. "Until that day, we do have to remind people, at least one day a year."

Karina Sterman in her youth.

Fighting for equity comes somewhat naturally to Sterman. There's a bit of a pugilist's DNA in her. Her father was a boxer when he was younger and for her fifth birthday, she remembers receiving a small pair of boxing gloves.

"It was inculcated in me," she says. "You stand up for people. You stand up for yourself. You don't let people walk all over you. You don't pick fights, but you don't shy away from fights."

She says she is "perpetually inserting myself when I think someone has been wronged unjustly. That's the part that really gets to me."

With that fighter's spirit, Sterman has spent the majority of her legal career as a litigator, defending businesses in class action lawsuits as well as in discrimination, retaliation, wrongful termination, and other employment disputes. But she has been an advocate since long before becoming a lawyer – when from a very young age she acted as her parents' interpreter after the family arrived in America knowing no English.

Sterman was 9 when her family was among 10,000 people permitted to emigrate from the Soviet Union through a national lottery. Her parents decided it was time to leave when the antisemitic community somehow found out that they were Jewish – a secret her parents had worked hard to keep for years, not even telling her out of fear for her safety – and life had become untenable, even dangerous.

Idel and Victoria Sterman arrived in the U.S. with their daughter in April 1980, flying into New York City. They brought their life savings — $415, all they had been allowed to take with them. They shared their first American meal in the hotel restaurant, and because they couldn't read the menu, they ordered the cheapest item listed – a slice of chocolate cake. Nine-year-old Sterman was delighted; her mother less so.

Attorney Karina Sterman traces her roots to Moldova.

The next day the family was flown to Columbus, Ohio where they were provided an apartment that had two stories – all to themselves. They were amazed. Sterman remembers their first trip to the supermarket and seeing an entire aisle dedicated to toilet paper. They were overwhelmed by the selection.

"It was unfathomable to us, the level of choice," says Sterman. "It felt like some big prize. It was so different from our experience in the Soviet Union where you had to stand in line for the toilet paper and a separate line for the chicken."

Sterman began attending the Columbus Torah Academy where she learned English as well as Hebrew. She was given a scholarship, but it didn't cover the entire cost and her parents had to sacrifice to meet the remaining tuition.

"Education was really the only thing we had," says Sterman. "They were constantly trying to teach me something."

Sterman spent her first summer in Columbus picking up English at the community pool and by the time school was back in session, she no longer needed classes in English. She still has the little pocket English-Russian dictionary her family used from those early days in Columbus.

The Stermans may have likely remained in Columbus for the foreseeable future if not for the discovery of a letter hidden away in a drawer, the investigatory skills of a distant relative, and a phone call from the west coast.

The letter was one Sterman's parents had written years before to a relative in Los Angeles and the woman's adult children discovered it in a drawer when she died. After having the letter translated, an aunt who was passionate about family connections tracked the Stermans down in Ohio and called to ask if she and her husband could come visit.

As it turned out, the Stermans had a whole passel of extended family living in Los Angeles who were thrilled to learn of their existence. Soon after, they flew to Los Angeles to attend a cousin's bat mitzvah and after a two-week visit, Sterman's mother had made up her mind: They were not going to continue living in Columbus. "These are good people," she said of the giant West Coast city. "We should be able to make a life here."

"My mother is a bit of a force," says Sterman with a laugh.

So Sterman's father stayed in L.A. to find a job while she and her mother returned to Columbus to pack up their worldly belongings. They rented a U-Haul truck and drove their Ford Zephyr across the country to start another new life in another new city, but this time surrounded by family.

Her mother found work as a bookkeeper at a company where she is now the chief financial officer.

Sterman went on to study literature and women's studies at UCLA. After college she considered earning a Ph.D. in literature, but she decided instead to attend University of Southern California Gould School of Law. It was a natural calling, actually. By the time she went to law school she had already spent untold hours volunteering at juvenile detention centers, with literacy programs, and in children's rights centers.

"That was just what you did. You helped people that needed the help," she says. "The advocacy part always felt intuitive to me."

After graduation, she took a position with a small law firm that specialized in securities litigation because she was "chomping at the bit" to gain courtroom experience. From her first courtroom appearance – a summary judgment she was granted based solely on her written motion – Sterman had caught the litigation bug.

"I thought it was exciting," she says. "I loved the legal research, the writing, the legal strategy."

She did eventually find securities litigation too insular and redundant, however, and so accepted a position with the Beverly Hills firm of Ervin Cohen & Jessup where she could pursue general business litigation and employment law.

She was with the firm for 16 years, eventually becoming an equity partner,

before joining Greenberg Glusker six years ago, where she has found an additional level of support for her clients and a different level of autonomy for herself in terms of steering her practice.

She and her husband Joshua Goode, a professor of cultural studies and history at Claremont Graduate University, have two children. Their son, Milo, is a junior at Tufts University in Massachusetts where he is studying international relations and is a member of the varsity track team. Their daughter, Anabel, is a senior at Marlborough, an all-girls school in Los Angeles, and she is currently interested in policy and international diplomacy.

Sterman says she is now interested in reigniting her passion for being part of the legal community. She is the former District 7 governor of California Women Lawyers, a women's legal rights advocacy group and is currently on the Diversity in the Law Committee for the Los Angeles County Bar.

And she is dedicated to mentoring younger attorneys, though she can't say she had any mentors as a young woman lawyer.

"The few women who were senior lawyers, basically their advice was toughen up and develop a thick skin," she says. "They said if you want to be treated equally and treated with respect, don't point out constantly that you're a woman."

Sterman characterizes it as mentorship by abdication. She had to develop her own style. She encourages young attorneys to not always look for wrongs, to give people a break and to remember that not everyone comes from the same background or culture.

"I could have benefited from active mentorship," she says. "All younger attorneys can benefit from active mentorship. Somebody who reaches out proactively. I'm a strong proponent of that."

Greenberg Glusker has created a program where they match senior attorneys with junior attorneys, and Sterman said she "loves empowering younger lawyers."

She believes in dialogue and discourse and not writing people off – not even opposing counsel.

"As long as we can keep talking, we can find some reminder that we are both human beings and our dispute is not about ourselves individually and that's really, I think, the kind of mentoring all lawyers need – that it's not about themselves," she says. "It's about representing your clients and the interests and rights of your clients."

Above: The beauty of the Butler House was enjoyed by Karina and her husband during a visit to Kilkenny, Ireland.

Karina with her husband, Joshua Goode, in a favorite photo.