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Who's Here: Nancy Chemtob, Lawyer

By David Lion Rattiner



When you talk with Nancy Chemtob, you get a sense that you're talking to somebody that knows a lot about people and a lot about life. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that the reason for this is because she is one of Manhattan's (and the

nation's) most powerful matrimonial lawyers. Chemtob deals with divorce and her tone is both calming and smart-both necessary to become as accomplished as she is in her chosen field.

She is the founding partner of Chemtob Moss Forman & Talbert, LLP, which has risen from its humble beginnings to representing high profile clients such as Stephanie Madoff, Tory Burch, Star Jones, Tiki Barber's ex-wife Ginny Barber, Michael Douglas' ex-wife Diandra Douglas, law firm managing partners as well as billionaire hedge fund managers whose divorces are as private as their businesses. She was named to Worth Magazine's "100 Top Attorneys" list for three consecutive years as one of only two matrimonial lawyers in New York and is also on the prestigious New York "Super Lawyers" list.

Chemtob grew up in a largely Jewish Long Island neighborhood and felt pressure from her family to go into law. "I grew up in Lawrence and went to school there," she said. "Back then it was predominantly Jewish, but it wasn't Orthodox like it is today. I come from a family of lawyers, so it was a natural fallback, but originally I wanted to be a fashion designer. However that didn't work out so well. I was also told growing up that if I did not want to be a lawyer, I could consider being a doctor or an accountant. I resisted it at first, but then decided that I wanted to be a lawyer. I ended up going to Syracuse College and then went to Miami Law School."

When Chemtob graduated from law school, real estate law was a booming business, but then dried up, "In 1990 I had a job in real estate law and the market crashed. So when that job disappeared I went into employment law. By 1993 I was married and my husband was computerizing a law firm that did divorce law and he thought it would be perfect for me because all the clients talked about was money and kids. That sounded good to me, so I decided to look into it."

But in the world of matrimonial law, getting a job is not easy, and Chemtob's background in unemployment and real estate law didn't help. She knew that she would be good at it however, and that was when the wheels started turning to the idea that she'd open up her own firm.

"Matrimonial law is really competitive," she said. "You have to specialize in it to get a job. So my husband and I decided I should open my own firm. I told everyone I knew that I did divorce law and began marketing myself. I started getting really good results on cases and the word got around."

Chemtob rose to the top in one of the most difficult facets of law. Today her firm employs the brightest law school graduates from top tier schools. Chemtob does all the hiring and she has had a no nonsense attitude about who is invited to join her firm. "Since matrimonial law is so exclusive and there are only a few firms to go to, I have always made a point to hire lawyers that are smarter than myself," she said with a laugh.

Chemtob's story is one of hard work and dedication, with luck having very little to do with success. Her success was determined by the diligence in and dedication to her craft as a lawyer. "I got where I am through a lot of really, really hard work," she said. "There was zero luck."

When she's not working in the city, Chemtob calls the Hamptons her home. She and her husband bought a house here nearly 20 years ago.

"We have had a place in East Hampton since 1993. My husband is a big believer in the Hamptons. One year he told me that all he wanted to do was buy this piece of land in East Hampton and so he did-it was right on Montauk Highway. That was five houses ago," she said. "We bought a house from the Halseys in Water Mill but I really love East Hampton. So we sold the Water Mill house and then bought a house on Georgica Road, which we recently donated to the fire department to burn down as part of their training. That was really an amazing experience."

Mixing work with the East End is something that has been a logical extension of her business, considering that much of her client base spends as much time here as she does. "I'd say that almost 50% of the people I work with have a house out on the East End," said Chemtob, who enjoys her East Hampton home year round.

"In the winter we come out and we do almost nothing," she said. "We bring the kids and go to the movies, eat at home or go out to eat, but we aren't throwing parties. We head back to the city on Sunday. Our favorite restaurants out here are Nick and Toni's, Tutto Il Giorno and of course, the bacon, egg and cheese sandwiches and the doughnuts at Dreesen's, or I should say Scoop Du Jour. I miss Barefoot Contessa a lot.

"In the summer, Main Beach is it, Sunset Beach is our Sunday trip and we barbecue a lot at home," she continued. "My husband is a big cook. I spend a lot of time working in the city, but when people ask me where I live, I tell them I live in the Hamptons."