



Profile: Micha Star Liberty

Full-fledged advocate with a busy practice bucks the stereotypes, still manages to find balance in her life

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Balance is the underlying theme for much of Micha Star Liberty's existence. At times, it might be akin to a simple yoga pose. Other times, it can be like traversing a high wire in a hurricane. Yet through it all, she manages to maintain her focus – and her sanity.

Liberty not only runs her own firm, Liberty Law, and dedicates countless hours to her clients, but she also makes time for political causes, gives back to the bar through several organizations – lecturing, writing, teaching, governing – and still somehow has time left over for herself.

While she's learned over the years that it's OK to say no, she still doesn't do it often. There are many things she's passionate about, people and organizations that are near and dear to her heart, she said, and sometimes it's hard to turn them down. "My calendar is like a game of Tetris, and as soon as I can figure out how to clone people, I'll be much better served," Liberty said, with a laugh. "I feel like it's how you know you've really found what you're supposed to do when you wake up excited for a 15-hour day.

"It's really part of our obligation to our clients, to all consumers and to the plaintiffs' community to try to give back in any way we can," she continued. "It's like a second job – but it doesn't feel like a job."

Those marathon workdays illustrate what makes Liberty more than just a plaintiffs' trial attorney. She is without doubt a full-fledged advocate who devotes her time and knowledge in the form of lectures and seminars and articles and guides. She understands politics, the importance of diversity and change and how to stand up for what's fair and right.

In a relatively short time – 15 years with the bar – Liberty has become a role



Liberty

model for women in her profession, bucking the age-old stereotypes not only via her courtroom prowess but also by being the boss, taking the cases she wants to take, making tough business decisions

and ultimately being the driver of her successes and failures. It may not be an entirely unique position these days, even for a woman, but it's clearly a cut above the ordinary.

"About four years out of law school, I realized it just made sense to me to be able to practice law the way I wanted to practice law," Liberty explained about her decision to start her own firm. "It's a really different experience, I think, when you're a young female attorney and the examples that you see are men who have been practicing for 30 years. I realized that I wanted to develop my own personality as an attorney – something that worked for me rather than trying to be a 60-year-old man.

"I think young lawyers, particularly women, being able to find out who they are as an authentic person first and then as an authentic lawyer is paramount to success," she continued. "And I wanted the space and the freedom to be able to develop into the lawyer that works for me."

What works best for Liberty is trying cases. Her practice covers the full spectrum of plaintiffs' law but with more of a focus on areas such as employment rights, consumer protection, defective products, sexual abuse and personal

injury. Though she doesn't get to trial as often as she likes, Liberty prepares every case as if it's headed that way. For her, she said, that entails becoming one with the case, steeping herself in everything related to the facts and the evidence and the story she's going to tell – and how she plans on connecting with the jury. In doing the latter, she said, trial lawyers must stay true to themselves.

"I don't know if you've ever watched a trial, but I've watched a few and watched opposing counsel (during her trials), and sometimes you see lawyers put on a costume and play lawyer," Liberty explained. "Jurors are real people. The experience of serving on a jury is usually unique, sometimes once in a lifetime, and they want to, like every other human being, connect with the people that are around them. And when they're taking time away from their jobs and maybe their families to be there and do their civic duty, they want to know they're getting an authentic and trustworthy person."

Champion of diversity

Liberty was born in San Francisco but raised for her first five years on Maui, where she learned at a very early age to embrace diversity. At the time, there was still an element of segregation on the islands – there were people who were Hawaiian and people who were not, she recalled. Growing up with the understanding that she was part of the "other" – what the native Hawaiians called *haoles* (how-leez) – made her more conscious and sensitive to different perspectives and backgrounds.

"Inclusion became very important to me," she said, "and fighting to increase diversity became very important to me at a very young age. Any kind of diversity."

Another considerable influence, she noted, was a politically charged family



environment. Sunday dinners and holiday gatherings almost always included discussions – or rather debates – about current events, law, politics and social issues, and everyone was expected to take a stance. It was similar to the old television show “The McLaughlin Group,” she recalled.

“Someone would throw out a topic, and then everyone would rush in with their opinion and position,” said Liberty, whose grandfather was a court administrator and two uncles were attorneys. “And you’d better be able to back it up.”

Indeed, Liberty, as a youth, was encouraged to develop her voice and stand up for herself and others in the name of fundamental fairness. “When I saw something that was unfair, even as a kid, I would advocate for change,” she recalled. “I think it’s just some people, fortunately or unfortunately, are wired this way. I’ve always kind of been a fighter.”

Upon graduating from UCLA, Liberty went to work in politics, first at the White House during President Bill Clinton’s first term and then on Capitol Hill for two members of Congress, Rep. Mel Watt, of North Carolina, and Rep. Anna Eshoo, of California. She decided to go to law school because it was her contention that if she was going to be drafting legislation, she needed to understand the law “in a different way.” She came out to the Bay Area to attend UC Hastings College of the Law and had every intention of returning to Washington, D.C., after getting her law degree. But then she started clerking, and her plans changed.

“I went to work for a plaintiffs’ firm here in the area and just kind of fell in love with plaintiffs’ work,” recalled Liberty, who during law school took to fighting, literally, in the ring as an amateur boxer. “My two uncles were plaintiffs’ lawyers, so I had that as an example. Once I saw the work that plaintiffs’ lawyers do, I knew that if I was actually going to practice law, there was no other law I could practice.”

Taking the plunge

When Liberty opened her own firm in 2005, balance again was the key, especially

in the beginning. It was in some respects like starting over, learning how to do everything for herself, and that, she said, took up much of her bandwidth. She likened it to having three jobs: business owner, marketing manager and, of course, lawyer. “I can’t believe it’s been 10 years already,” she said. “But it’s the best decision I’ve ever made, and I think it has made me a better advocate and a better lawyer for my clients. You look at your cases differently, you look at your clients differently, and the relationships you form are so much more substantial when it’s your firm.” Liberty now runs Liberty Law with partner Seth Rosenberg.

Liberty said all of her cases are memorable, but she holds a special place in her heart for the sexual abuse victims she has represented over the years. Most of those cases were against doctors, therapists, teachers and priests. And every one of them has stuck with her, regardless of the result, she said.

“The ability to watch a plaintiff go from a sense of victimhood to a sense of empowerment is awe-inspiring,” Liberty said. “We’re able to provide people who really need financial assistance to get the psychological help they need. And it’s such a unique position and such an honor to be able to do that for people. ... I have seen through my clients how being molested as a child can change the course of their lives, and I hope to be able to course-correct with them.”

It’s particularly gratifying, she said, when she’s able to do that for clients who are physically or mentally unable to express to others their ordeal. “I’ve done a lot of cases where the victim has been disabled and may not be able to speak, may not have the cognitive capacity to explain what happened,” Liberty said. “The level of contempt or disrespect you get from the other side when the person can’t properly articulate what happened to them is what gets me up in the morning to fight the fight on my clients’ behalf.”

Spreading her wings

During breaks in her work schedule, brief and rare as they are, Liberty keeps a

dedicated meditation practice, loves to go salsa dancing and continues to box, though not competitively. She tries to embark on one or two personal ventures or activities a year that aren’t law-related, such as a wine appreciation course or a cooking class.

And she loves international travel, having trekked to Greece and Italy last year. A few years ago, she took what she dubbed the trip of a lifetime, a two-week jaunt in the Himalayas at just over 14,000 feet.

“We were able to go to a place where no one had ever been – it’s all protected, and no one had been able to hike into this sacred area,” she said. “It was incredible. ... I try to stretch myself beyond my comfort zone because I’m kind of a girly girl. Again, it’s about balance. I want to be a total, real person, and it’s important for me to try new things and try things I’m not good at.”

Overcoming uncertainties, indeed, has been a huge part of Liberty’s climb to successful trial lawyer. But it hasn’t been a solo endeavor by any stretch, and that’s the message she would try to make perfectly clear to those coming up in the field.

“Don’t ever let the natural fear and insecurity that comes with being a new lawyer stop you from trying a case or taking a case or taking a new job,” she advised. “There is a big family out there of trial lawyers, and all you have to do is pick up the phone and ask for help because there are so many people out there who will answer your question, who will give you advice, who will give you samples of work products you need. Take advantage of this community of trial lawyers that surrounds you.”

And, she added, she wouldn’t be anywhere without the team she has right by her side to keep her centered: “None of us can achieve success without good people around us. It’s important to say that. No one achieves anything on their own.”

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