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# Litigator Jill Nexon Berman Recalls Career Risks, Personal Tragedy

Berman left a secure job at one law firm to help start a new firm from scratch.

By **Lidia Dinkova** | April 20, 2018 at 09:42 AM



Jill Nexon Berman is a partner with Rennert Vogel Mandler & Rodriguez. Photo: J.Albert Diaz/ALM

Jill Nexon Berman has taken professional risks and coped with challenges and tragedies both in her law career and personal life.

She left a secure job at one firm to help start another one. She cared for her ailing husband, Neil Berman, who died in 2012, while also working and raising their two children. She took over the task of managing the family finances after her husband's death.

Berman is a commercial, real estate, construction and intellectual property litigator and a partner at Rennert Vogel Mandler & Rodriguez, a law firm she and her litigator-husband helped launch in 1994 in Miami.

Growing up in Boston as the daughter of a real estate attorney, it seemed she was destined to become a litigator. She says she is argumentative and a talker. She used to help her father proofread legal documents.

“I sat in his study, and I would read them back to him and then he would say, ‘Stop,’ and he would write something in his pencil, and then he would say, ‘Go,’ and then sometimes he would give me tips on drafting. For example, he would say, ‘Somebody else wrote this document. I wouldn’t write it this way, but you don’t correct people on irrelevant issues and annoy them if it’s not important even though you wouldn’t say it that way,’ ” Berman said.

She succeeded as a Boston College law student, graduating cum laude, she said. The school’s appeal to her largely stemmed from its strong bent toward litigation.

“I like thinking on my feet.”

It was in moot court where Berman honed her skills, learning how to argue both sides, one week representing one side and the next week the other side of the same case. The skill still came in useful.

“It’s something that you use if you are a good lawyer, a good litigator. You have to stop and say, ‘OK, I have been convinced by my client that my client is right, but if I were arguing the other side of this case, what would I argue and how would I combat’ that opposing position, Berman said.

She and some of her classmates went on to win competitions, and litigation success followed once she started practicing.

In about 2000, she and Neil Berman won a jury trial in Broward Circuit Court on behalf of an employee for Toys R Us, then a successful company, she said. Toys R Us stores now are liquidating nationwide after filing for bankruptcy protection last fall.

The issue was over whether the staff member, who was instrumental in the retailer’s growth, could exercise his stock options when he retired, Berman said.

“I was very proud that we were able to get such good results for him. I think he had a meritorious claim but a difficult claim,” she said.

## **CAREER, LIFE CHANGES**

In 1994, Jill Berman was the head of litigation at Valdes-Fauli Cobb, which later merged into Gunster. Neil Berman was working closely with Lenny Wolfe, his wife’s law partner at Valdes-Fauli, and the two started talking about forming their own firm.

They went for it, taking with them some of Valdes-Fauli’s attorneys, including Howard Vogel, as well as clients, Berman said.

She was faced with a choice — “Do I stay here after Neil and my partner leave with a lot of our clients, or do I go with them?” — and opted for the risk.

“It would have been safer for me to stay there and continue to draw my salary from Valdes-Fauli and have him (Neil Berman) start this new venture. But we had some savings, and we had a lot of confidence, and we had some clients we knew would go with us,” she said. “While it’s a little nerve-wracking when you had been in some place for a long time, I had a lot of confidence in the people I was going to be practicing with.”

The new firm grew, but other challenges arose.

Neil Berman, a nonsmoker, was diagnosed with lung cancer. While he worked for another year, his health then deteriorated.

Jill Berman was split between taking care of him and work, although she noted the firm was accommodating and understanding of her family obligations.

After his death, she took over the family’s financial management, including investment decisions and finding the right experts to manage his stock portfolio.

To help, he left her a 17-page memo, only complete with account numbers and passwords and speckled with humor, she added.

“For him,” she said, “it was a way of continuing to be a good husband and a good father.”

After his death, she turned to her work as a way to cope.

“I know someone, a very good mediator, who recently lost his wife, very sadly and very quickly, and that was the advice I gave him. I said, ‘Go back to work.’ I saw him recently and he said, ‘Best advice.’ ”

## **JILL NEXON BERMAN**

**Born:** Boston, 1953

**Children:** Zachary and Benjamin

**Education:** Boston College, J.D., 1978; Smith College, B.A., 1975

**Experience:** Rennert Vogel Mandler & Rodriguez, 1994-present; Valdes-Fauli Cobb, 1983-1994; Arky Freed, 1978-1983