

Rosemarie's Baby

At Rosemarie Arnold's firm – where more than a thousand cases are open at any given time – the client is king

Rosemarie Arnold wants to know what my angle is. “Rags to riches?” she asks during our first call. “Successful female in a male-dominated field? You know, that would work too.”

Such questions come naturally to someone who tells stories for a living. Ask Arnold about her practice and she'll tell you the stories. There's the story of 2-year-old Antonia Verni, who went out to pick pumpkins with her parents one Saturday in October 1999. On the way home, about five miles from Giants Stadium, a pickup truck swerved across the center line, hit another car, and then hit the Verni family head on. The driver, Daniel Lanzaro, had just come from a football game, and his blood alcohol content was more than three times the legal limit in New Jersey. In the crash, Antonia was paralyzed from the neck down.

Then there's the tragic story of 9-month-old Matthew Pensec, still too young to walk or crawl, who choked to death on a pebble in his day care provider's home. When his mother arrived to pick him up, having stopped off to run an errand, she found him surrounded by police officers and emergency workers, unresponsive. Or Leona Swiderski, who traveled to India to meet her fiance's family only to be murdered hours after arriving - by someone her fiance had hired. Questioned by the police, the fiance confessed too quickly to gather the witnesses required by Indian law and so his conviction was thrown out.

These stories and others like them are what keep Arnold up at night. They keep her on the phone with distraught parents for hours at a time. They drive her to take on Toyota or the NFL or the pharmaceutical companies, and send her onto CNN or MSNBC, in the hopes of bringing her clients' stories to a wider audience. Her dedication to cases brought on behalf of people like Antonia, Matthew and Leona has made her one of the top plaintiff's attorneys in Bergen County, turning her solo practice into a 12-attorney operation that manages more than a thousand open cases at any given time. “I don't know how this happened. I don't know how this got so big,” Arnold says.

As it happens, Rosemarie Arnold's own story is every bit as compelling as the other ones she tells. It just has a happier ending.

Arnold grew up in a two-bedroom apartment in Washington Heights, the second of six kids who

arrived in quick succession. She was 5 when her father died of cancer. “He didn't have any insurance or anything like that, and so we were poor,” Arnold says. Her mother, who had trained as a teacher, went to work during the day and to school at night. Looking back, Arnold realizes her mother may have been struggling with the pain of her husband's death. “When I was a kid, it's just - she stayed in her bed a lot, that's what my mother did. And people would come over and sit in the rocking chair and talk to my mother in her room and that's the way it was.”

And so, at age 5, Rosemarie took responsibility for her younger sisters, getting up in the mornings and fixing a bottle for her 18 month-old sister Nancy. All five girls slept in the dining room, which served as a third bedroom, with a triple-decker bed. “All I ever wanted was to have a back yard,” Arnold says. “And my own bathroom and my own room.” Her family stayed in the apartment throughout her childhood, even as the neighborhood went downhill even after someone was stabbed outside their bedroom window. She's not sure why exactly she chose law school. “The truth of the matter is I wanted to be something professional where I could make a good living,” Arnold says. Always a good student, she graduated from Brooklyn Law School in 1986 and went to work for attorney Christian Steuben in Fort Lee, doing both plaintiff's and defense work. Not long afterward, Steuben got very sick and couldn't work for a while. Once again, Rosemarie Arnold stepped up. “It was a trial by fire. Six months out of law school, I tried my first case. I liked it. And then I won and I loved it,” she says.

**BY KIRSTEN MARCUM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LARRY MARCUS**

MOVING ON UP
Arnold doesn't publicize her multimillion-dollar wins, but a reception area papered with thank-you cards speaks volumes



In time, she discovered that she liked the plaintiff's work better than defense, and so in 1989, still in her 20s, she opened her own firm, the Law Offices of Rosemarie Arnold. To make ends meet, she handled per diem work for other lawyers during the day and spent nights working on her own cases. “After hours, I would call my clients,” she says. “I didn't have any responsibilities. I didn't have kids. I could stay on the phone with people for an hour. They liked it because I was really paying attention to them, and I was able to do a really good job on the case.”

Before long, Arnold was able to phase out the per diem work and concentrate on her own clients. And they kept coming, sent by other clients or by people who had heard of Arnold. “People just kept sending them and sending them. Then I would do well and people would send me their friends and family,” she says. “Finally, when I was working from 5 in the morning until 12 at night and I couldn't finish my work, I hired an associate. And little by little, business kept coming in, and I just kept hiring more and more people.”

Like most personal injury attorneys, Arnold will tell you that she cares more about justice than money. But unlike most personal injury attorneys, she doesn't publicize her results, even the multimillion-dollar ones. She doesn't call them in to the paper or send out press releases or include them on her Web site. “We brag about the client's satisfaction, not the verdict,” she says.

Today, the Law Offices of Rosemarie Arnold is something of a Fort Lee institution. Housed in a handsome beige stucco building at the foot of the George Washington Bridge, it has a 16-year track record of doggedness and a reception room papered with thank-you cards. Many people Arnold runs into have heard of her. Not long ago, she stopped off after work to pick up a deli tray. While chatting with the guy behind the counter, he discovered she was a lawyer. “Not Rosemarie Arnold?” he asked her. “I have an appointment with your firm on Monday.”

And Arnold now has her back yard. Home is a comfortable 276-year-old farmhouse on six acres that she shares with her husband, Steve, and her daughters Hana, 5, and Juliana, 2.

Still, she, more than most people, is acutely aware of how quickly a life can change.

“It's amazing how someone's negligence can affect the lives of people they've never met and don't know,” she says. “When one of my kids wakes up in the middle of the night, it's sometimes difficult to go back to sleep because I start thinking about all the craziness.” And she tells one more story, of a mother and daughter who were bringing a pig to a county fair. “What kills me is, they weren't thinking their lives would change,” she says of the accident that took the mother's life. “They were driving down the road and do you know what they were thinking? They were thinking: ‘Oh, I hope my pig wins.’”