

'Jersey girl' had early ambitions for an impactful career in law



By Brian Cox

New York attorney Jessica Klotz remembers crying as a young girl when in 1981 Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

But hers were not tears of joy.

Rather, Klotz was crushed with disappointment. As far back as the 4th grade, she had set her eyes on becoming the first woman on the nation's high court when she was given the role of judge in a class project that simulated a small town.

"I'm probably the only woman who cried when Sandra Day O'Connor was appointed because that was my dream," says Klotz.

The law hook was set, however, and Klotz knew from that day that she was going to be a lawyer.

A self-proclaimed "Jersey girl, born and bred," Klotz grew up in Hackensack before the family moved to Fair Lawn when she was 10 and her sister was 6. Her father was in real estate and her mother, after staying home to raise children, returned to school to get a paralegal degree and then a master's in library science. She became the law librarian for the U.S. Attorney's Office for the

District of New Jersey in Newark.

"To see her at work or hear from the lawyers who worked with her about her as a professional was a unique experience," says Klotz, who would occasionally grab lunch with her mom when she had appearances in the federal court in Newark. "She was very impressive."

Klotz's grandfather, Arthur Tauber, was an All-American fencer whose Olympic aspirations were cut short by World War II. After earning a Bronze Star for his service in the war, he returned home to become a beloved fencing coach at Yeshiva University for nearly 40 years. He was a rare champion fencer in all three weapons of the sport (foil, epee, and sabre) and was featured in the May 4, 1942, issue of Life Magazine as the "best collegiate swordsman." Naturally, then, he taught the sport to his grandchildren.



Attorney Jessica Klotz is the granddaughter of renowned fencing coach Arthur Tauber, who taught her the sport growing up in New Jersey. She was a member of the Fair Lawn High School varsity fencing team all four years (pictured above, second from the left in the back row) and went on to fence collegiately at Rutgers.



Attorney Jessica Klotz with her mother, Roberta, and her sister, Elissa. Klotz's mother was the law librarian for the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of New Jersey in Newark for many years.

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"He'd have us doing advances and retreats up and down the driveway," says Klotz, who fenced on the varsity team all four years in high school and in college at Rutgers.

She says the discipline demanded by the sport trained her in many respects for a career in law.

"It's very similar to the law because it's also a mental game against your opponents," says Klotz. "There are feints and parries, and looking for the weaknesses in your opponent's arguments is very similar to looking for that spot on the target of your adversary that you can strike."

After graduating with a degree in political science and English from Rutgers, Klotz attended Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law in New York City, where she was a member of the Moot Court Honor Society and was awarded the Jacob M. Burns Medal for Academic Excellence. As a 2L, she clerked for a judge in the Supreme Court, Bronx County, Criminal Term who happened to be a former student of her grandfather's.

Klotz, who is admitted to practice in New Jersey and New York, was drawn to litigation due to her innate interest in the dynamics of a legal dispute.

"I love to argue, in a word," she says with a laugh. "I love figuring out how to prove my point during written motions and oral arguments, how to convince the judge that my client should win or that my adversary should lose."

She thought for a time about becoming a prosecutor, but after law school she took a position with a small plaintiff's law firm in Manhattan. After two years, she was looking for a change when an opportunity arose to join an insurance defense firm. She welcomed the switch and the chance to expand her skill set and experience and accepted a position with the defense firm of Lester Schwab Katz & Dwyer, LLP, in New York City where she handled matters involving both civil and commercial litigation,



Jessica and her husband, Michael, have two daughters. Lindsay is a senior at Bentley University in Massachusetts and Stephanie is a freshman at Hunter College in New York City.

in the state and federal courts of New York and New Jersey. She worked there for eight years.

In 2004, Klotz joined Lewis Johs Avallone Aviles, LLP, a full-service law firm with offices in Long Island and New York City. As Senior Counsel, Klotz concentrates her practice in the defense of individuals, corporations, professionals and municipalities in areas of civil litigation, including premises liability, personal injury, property damage, employment law and sexual harassment, intentional torts, professional liability, maritime law, and civil rights violations in both state and federal courts.

With more than sixty attorneys, the firm continues to grow and expand its practice areas. According to Klotz, Lewis Johs not only handles insurance defense work, the firm practices complex commercial litigation, civil trials, business transactions, real estate and banking matters, appeals, trusts and estates and elder law.

Klotz also has forged what she calls a "bit of a niche" practice concerning the obligations of settling parties under the Medicare Secondary Payer Act. She has served as counsel to insurance companies to ensure they have fulfilled those obligations and has lectured on the topic.

Klotz is the immediate past chair of the Primerus™ Women Lawyers Section. She has been a member of the section's executive committee since its inception. She says being a female in the legal profession has changed in many ways since the early



Jessica and her husband Michael with their daughters, Stephanie and Lindsay, on vacation in Aruba.

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days of her career in the 1990s when judges still expected women lawyers to wear skirts and might address them as “honey” or “sweetie.” She clarified, “By today’s standards, this behavior is not accepted or condoned. But in the early 1990s, that is just the way it was.”

However, Klotz says she never let the culture phase her. “I don’t think it deterred me in any way,” she says. “I was brought up with the belief that despite gender roles in employment, you, as a woman, can do whatever you want to do. Period. End of story. You just have to work hard.”

Challenges remain, of course. Klotz says she often discusses with her Primerus™ colleagues the dynamics of work-life balance. Does it even exist? Maybe the idea of finding “balance” is a myth. Klotz says it’s important for women attorneys to reassure each other that it’s okay if they’re not doing everything, or not doing everything well. She says that she notices her female colleagues – those with families, in particular – “tend to take on a lot” of responsibilities in their personal life, including carpools, planning gatherings and maintaining the family social calendar, all while working full time as a lawyer.

“Those kinds of conversations are very important, I think, especially to younger female attorneys as they come up, because I think we do take on those obligations more than our male peers do,” she says.

She and her husband, Michael, have two children. Her oldest daughter, Lindsay, is 21 and will be graduating from Bentley University in Massachusetts in May with a dual degree in marketing and information design and corporate communication. Her daughter, Stephanie, 18, is a freshman at Hunter College in New York City who is considering a career in television



Passionate fans of Broadway theater, Jessica and her daughters, Stephanie and Lindsay, attend “Into the Woods.”

production.

Klotz describes herself as a “huge theater fan” and shares her passion for Broadway with her daughters. When theaters went dark during the COVID pandemic, Klotz was at a loss. Pre-COVID, she and her daughters would attend Broadway shows twice a year.

“Missing live theater for almost three years was very traumatic for me,” she says. “Watching theater, especially musical theater, on television or a computer screen is just not the same. The first time I was in a theater post-COVID with a live audience responding to the actors on stage, that’s when I felt we had passed the hard part of the pandemic.”

Klotz sat on the Executive Board of her law school’s alumni association and for the past five years has been an adviser in the local sorority chapter of BBYO (formerly B’nai B’rith Youth Organization), a Jewish organization for teens that has a network of chapters across North America and in 60 countries. As she has done with her own daughters, she strives to instill in the teenage girls in the BBYO chapter that they can achieve whatever they want. She is clear about her expectations: Do the best you can.

“If you’re doing the best you can, then I’m happy,” she says. “If you’re not doing your best, then I want more from you.”

It is a mantra she believes she has role modeled for them, but she is not inclined to pat herself on the back.

“It’s just been something I’ve always done,” she says. “This is just part of who I am.”



Jessica and her daughter Stephanie attend a preview of “Shucked,” a new musical at the Nederlander Theatre.