

# Military spouse attorney 'lucks' into medical malpractice law work and loves it

By Brian Cox

As an experienced litigator of nearly 15 years, Thea Pitzen has often stood in front of a judge or jury and thought: "There's no way this is harder than teaching a roomful of middle-schoolers."

The civil defense attorney with Goodman Allen Donnelly in Norfolk, Va., makes the observation based on personal experience



Virginia attorney Thea Pitzen and her husband, Wayne, have two children. Tori is 10 and Will is 5.



teaching in a classroom. After graduating at the age of 20 from New York University (NYU) in 2004 with a degree in international relations, Pitzen joined Teach for America, an organization that recruits college graduates to teach in under-resourced schools. She taught middle school in Miami for one year and then elementary school in inner-city Atlanta for a second year. She remembers the weight she felt from the responsibility of trying to teach second graders to read.

"I think teaching was the hardest thing I've ever done," she says. "We certainly do not pay teachers enough money in this country. They do not get enough respect. It is hard. It's also incredibly rewarding. It is one of the most rewarding things I've ever done."

Pitzen was born and raised in Greenville, S.C., where her parents still live. She attended the same private school from kindergarten through high school, graduating with a class of 67.

Her father was a nuclear and mechanical engineer who traveled extensively as an executive with Fluor Corp., a multi-national engineering and construction company. Her mother was a CPA, who returned to full-time work after her children were older and eventually became the chief financial officer for the National Council of Examiners for Engineering and Surveying.

"It was inspiring to see her go from prioritizing motherhood to climbing the ladder professionally and end up retiring at such a high position and having success both professionally and in our family life," says Pitzen of her mother.

Her father emigrated from the Netherlands to the U.S. when he was 16, and her mother grew up in a small town in Alabama, where she was the first woman in her family to go to college; it was a big deal to everyone when she went on to also earn a master's degree. The couple, who have now been married for 45 years, met in Dothan, Ala., which Pitzen says "has got to be fate."

Though he was often traveling, Pitzen doesn't recall her father being absent from important events. He managed to balance a demanding job while still prioritizing family. Only now, with children of her own, does Pitzen fully appreciate the effort her



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**Thea and her kids welcome home Wayne from a deployment. Thea is active with the Military Spouse JD Network, a bar association for military spouse attorneys.**

father made to provide his children with a stable upbringing. For many years, he commuted weekly from South Carolina to Texas for work, flying back home every weekend.

"I'm certain his life would have been easier if we just relocated, but instead, my sister and I had the benefit of growing up in the same house where my parents still live," says Pitzen with admiration. "Only now that I travel a lot myself for work, I realize how much he did to keep our lives stable."

In high school, Pitzen played volleyball on the varsity team, as well as on the Junior Olympic club circuit. She also studied classical piano for 11 years. The family traveled frequently, including to Europe on multiple occasions and to South Africa for a particularly memorable trip when Pitzen was in high school.

"My parents prioritized education and experiences over fancy cars and extravagant homes," she says.

After high school graduation, she was accepted at NYU and left for Manhattan, nearly the polar opposite of her hometown Greenville. It was late August 2001.

Three weeks after her arrival at the university, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center on September 11. She was in the dining hall having breakfast when the second plane struck the South Tower. Later, she remembers being in class and feeling the ground tremble when the towers collapsed. Outside, she was

stunned to find the entire skyline changed and the air filled with smoke. Being out on the streets seemed surreal, she says.

"It was weird, but it was also a time of solidarity," she recalls. "There was a ton of kindness, and it was probably the most like a neighborhood that New York ever felt as a whole."

When transportation out of the city was re-opened, Pitzen took a packed Amtrak to Greensboro, N.C. where her relieved parents met her to take her home for a few days. Pitzen remembers getting off the train in the middle of the night in Greensboro and seeing Muslim families grocery shopping under the cover of darkness because they didn't feel safe going out during the day.

"To me, that felt so tragic and unjust," says Pitzen. "It felt so unfair to characterize a whole religion, a whole population of people, based on the acts of a few."

Pitzen says her experience on 9/11 and its aftermath heightened her sense of cultural and global awareness, as well as her commitment to tolerance and inclusion. At NYU, she went on to take many classes in Islamic studies and became interested in learning about different cultures.

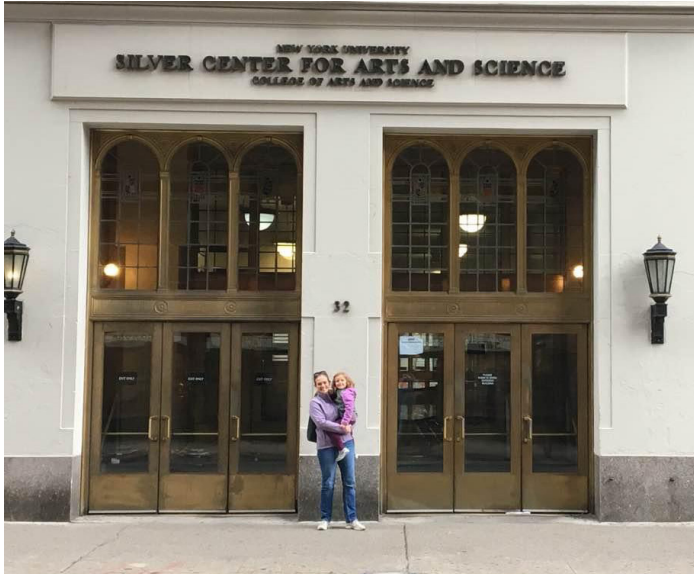
Some of her friends were surprised when she decided to return to school in Manhattan after the terrorist attacks.

"It honestly didn't even dawn on me not to go back," she says. "It was never a thought that I wouldn't stay there. I loved it there from day one."



**Thea and Wayne recently took their kids, Tori and Will, on a Disney cruise. The family enjoys traveling together.**

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**Medical malpractice defense attorney Thea Pitzen visits her alma mater New York University with her daughter Tori. Pitzen was a freshman at NYU on Sept. 11, 2001, and experienced the attack on the World Trade Center.**

Though Pitzen hadn't gone to NYU with a clear plan to become a lawyer, by the time she graduated, she made her mind up to study law and took the LSAT. Following her two-year stint with Teach for America, Pitzen stayed in Atlanta to attend Emory University Law School, where she served as executive managing editor of the Emory International Law Review and as president of the Emory Immigration Law Society.

She thought at the time that she would likely end up practicing in either Atlanta or New York, two cities she loved. In line with that plan, she held summer associate positions with King & Spalding in Atlanta and then with the Wall Street law firm Millbank, both of which made her job offers.

What Pitzen didn't plan on, however, was meeting her future husband during her third year of law school. He was a U.S. Navy flight officer, stationed in Pensacola, Fla., where he was finishing his flight training.

The couple got engaged in December 2009, seven months after she graduated from Emory and was halfway through her judicial clerkship with the senior judge in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia. They married in June the following year. After completing the judicial clerkship, which Pitzen describes as an experience without an equivalent, she moved to Jacksonville, Fla., where her new husband, Wayne, was stationed with his squadron.

Having already taken and passed the Georgia bar exam, Pitzen was now required to also take the Florida bar exam – it wouldn't be the last bar she took, either. Her introduction to the roving life of a military spouse had just begun.

Pitzen became active with the Military Spouse JD Network, a bar association for military spouse attorneys that was formed nearly

15 years ago by a military spouse attorney who was frustrated with the licensing and employment hurdles she faced from frequently relocating. The organization supports military spouses in the legal profession by advocating for licensing accommodations and providing a network connecting military spouse attorneys with each other and their supporters. Thanks to its efforts, 44 states and the U.S. Virgin Islands now have military spouse attorney licensing accommodations.

"It's just grown into an incredible organization that I cannot say enough good things about," says Pitzen, who served two years as secretary on the group's board of directors. "A huge benefit is the solidarity it provides."

For the next three years in Jacksonville, Pitzen was an associate at Gunster Yoakley, a full-service law firm, where her practice focused on complex commercial and business litigation. She gained valuable experience in both state and federal courts.

"It taught me right out of the gate how important it is that the fit and culture of a firm are right," says Pitzen. "You have to have a real inherent love for the courtroom and litigating to stick with it and make a career out of it because it is grueling sometimes."

When her husband was transferred to northern Virginia, Pitzen was able to waive into the Washington, D.C. bar where she did some independent contract work and taught as an adjunct at the Catholic University of America Columbus Law School. She also had her first child, Victoria. The couple later added a son, Will, to the family.

In 2016, Wayne was transferred again, this time to Norfolk, where Pitzen, once again, had to take the state bar exam, as well as retake the professional ethics exam.

"I think in some ways it was easier just from the mental game," says Pitzen of taking the bar three times. "The exam doesn't psych you out when you've done it several times. It's not such an intimidating process."

When her daughter started preschool, Pitzen began considering opportunities in Norfolk. When a recruiter contacted her to say a medical malpractice defense firm was looking for a new attorney, Pitzen's first response was, "I don't know anything about medical malpractice. I've never done that."

But Goodman Allen Donnelly was primarily looking for someone with litigation experience, which Pitzen had plenty of, and she joined the firm in October 2016.

"I lucked into med mal defense and ended up loving it," says Pitzen. "I don't think I could have known then, that eight years later, I'd be a partner here."

Founded in 1998 by eight partners who decided to leave established Virginia law firms to create their own defense firm, Goodman Allen Donnelly is now a full-service firm with more than 20 attorneys and offices in Norfolk, Richmond, Charlottesville, and Williamsburg.



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“I think we are still known as a boutique health care firm,” says Pitzen. “It’s really a team atmosphere here. It’s people who genuinely enjoy working together and like the work they do. Everybody wants to pitch in. Everybody wants the team to succeed.”

Pitzen maintains a busy general civil litigation defense practice with a focus on defending hospitals, physicians, dentists, nurses, and other health care providers in malpractice cases and regulatory investigations. She also regularly provides risk management advice and counsel to health care providers and assists practitioners with licensing questions.

“We’re often representing people at the most stressful, difficult time in their professional careers. Their licenses and their entire livelihood are on the line,” says Pitzen. “I think it’s an unbelievable privilege to represent health care providers.”

And, as she has reminded herself on occasion, it’s not as difficult as teaching a classroom of middle school students.



**Thea and her husband Wayne met while she was at Emory University Law School in Atlanta and he was stationed in Pensacola, Fla. The couple now have two children, Tori and Will.**