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Employment law attorney
Suzanne Cerra



Cerra was convinced a woman could be a parent as well as a partner.

Suzanne Cerra's Better Way

She used to have bold ideas on how to run a firm; now she's using them

by AMY KATES

photography by LUIGI CIUFFETELLI

Here's the thing about Suzanne Cerra: Her easy manner and quick laugh could charm the rattle off a snake, but if you don't think she's flexing serious muscle under the sleeves of her silk blouse, you're mistaken. "I'll never forget taking one deposition ... My adversary was an older gentleman, 20 years my senior," says the petite Cerra. "After, like, four minutes he was trying to walk all over me, impose objections that were absolutely inappropriate. I was *not* going to be walked all over. Afterwards, he looked at me, surprised and said, 'You're either a lot older than you look or you've taken a lot more depositions than I thought.'"

Typical Cerra. The employment lawyer with Nukk-Freeman & Cerra in Short Hills has been surprising her peers for years.

"I WAS ALWAYS attracted to the logic of the law: look at facts, argue them, debate them," Cerra says. It helped that her father is a lawyer—70 and still practicing. A New Jersey native, she wanted to practice law here, ignoring the Manhattan sparkle up the interstate. "I wanted to end up here [in my career], so it made sense to start here," she says. "I loved the substance of the people and judges."

As a summer associate at Shanley & Fisher in Morristown in 1992 she met Pat Stanton, head of the employment group. "He just 'got' me," she says of her mentor. "I loved the subject matter. I

wouldn't want to be stuck in an office looking at documents all day. Every [employment] case is a human situation. There is never a dull moment."

One day, Stanton told her he was leaving and he was taking the whole department with him. "We'll come back for you," he promised," Cerra says. He did. She joined what is now Ogletree, Deakins, Nash, Smoak & Stewart in Morristown, making partner at 30. "The firm was very forward-thinking ... treat people the way they should be treated, and you will breed loyalty," she says. "I was excessively loyal to them."

As the only female attorney in the firm, when she became pregnant in 1998, the partners realized they had a slight problem: no maternity policy. So she wrote it. But she felt she was underperforming. "If you're billing 1,800 hours a year and someone else is billing 2,500, that's underperforming to me."

The mother of three (two at the time) had an epiphany while driving to pick up one of her daughters from nursery school. "I was late, I was doing a settlement for a large corporation on the phone and I get pulled over for speeding," she says, laughing. "I realized there had to be a better way."

The better way turned out to be The Law Office of Suzanne M. Cerra. "The bulk of my work was investigations," Cerra says. "Someone has made a complaint of harassment or gender discrimination, and I would gather factual information, interview witnesses, write a report and summarize my findings."

But an idea was brewing. "My 'better way' had to do with a support system," she says. "The raging feminist in me railed at the fact that so many women were leaving the legal profession at the pinnacle of their career because they want to start a family, and maybe get derailed," she says. Her law school friend and fellow lawyer-mother, Katherin Nukk-Freeman, agreed.

For years the two met and talked about their idea. "We decided right from the get-go

SUZANNE CERRA

- ▶ Co-founder of Nukk-Freeman & Cerra in Short Hills.
- ▶ All 14 lawyers at the firm are women.
- ▶ Selected to the *New Jersey Super Lawyers* Top 100 list.
- ▶ Made partner at her previous firm at age 30.



Cerra's other partners: husband Steve and children Jake, Julia and Sofie.

to differentiate ourselves from traditional firms and offer flex to every lawyer the day they walked in the door,” she says. “Usually, unless you’ve been at a firm for X amount of time, you have to apply for flex time, maybe write a proposal.

“We did not set out to be an all-women firm,” she continues. “It just seems flex time is more important to women. I hope by the time my daughter is grown, this is something just as important to men, to find that family-work balance.”

Nukk-Freeman & Cerra opened in 2006, employing only the co-founders and a secretary. Now they’ve expanded by 19 people and about 5,500 square feet.

“We recognize that everyone has personal commitments,” Cerra says. “That’s why we have many different schedules. Some are on three-day weeks, some five. Some 15 hours a week, some 20,” she says. “If I have a lawyer in here only 15 to 20 hours and she makes her client deliriously happy, what more can I ask for? Frankly, most of our clients aren’t even aware of our schedules.”

Clients, which range from businesses of five to 50,000 employees, couldn’t be happier. “When a firm doesn’t breed loyalty among its lawyers, there’s a high turnover,” she says. “When a firm works with its lawyers, it does the opposite. Our lawyers are staying, and clients appreciate that. One even said, ‘Why was the law industry so slow to catch on to this?’”

Jon Daidone, vice president of Jen Electric, found Cerra in a bleary-eyed Google search at 3 a.m. His company sold traffic sign control equipment, mostly to public entities. He alleged that the specifications for the equipment were rigged so a particular vendor got the contract, Cerra says. “So, this case—which went to the New Jersey Supreme Court, my only case to do so—wasn’t even in my practice area. I tried to refer him out, but he was insistent I take it,” she says.

“I just felt this immediate intuition about her,” say Daidone. “I’ve dealt with many lawyers, and her passion and client-first attitude made her the best lawyer I’ve ever had. She was going against a county in which she does business. That thought of, ‘How will this affect my career when I have to work with these people again?’ never

even entered the equation. That’s not something that you find very often.”

Cerra won *Jen Electric, Inc. v. County of Essex* in “flawless fashion,” Daidone says. “She was the only woman there ... and she kicked their asses, plain and simple.”

While she doesn’t mind doing battles, Cerra makes sure clients pay attention to preventing conflicts in the first place.

“The absence of preventative medicine can result in a lot of problems for employers,” she says. “Particularly in New Jersey, which is behind only California in having the most pro-employee law. So if an employee sues, even if completely bogus, our client will have to spend \$100,000

or far more just for the chance to win.” In New Jersey, there is no cap on damages if an employee sues and wins; the employer, even if successful, cannot recover fees. “It is incredibly one-sided.”

To protect clients, Cerra and her staff walk them through detailed checklists. “We provide an audit of their practices to point out exposure and give them a priority list. ‘These are the five things you absolutely should implement.’ For example, if the client doesn’t have anti-harassment or Equal Employment Opportunity policies, we recommend those are put in place immediately,” she says. “Ensuring they have a handbook. Making sure things are consistent—why does this employee get three weeks vacation? It’s an opportunity to go in and counsel someone, and prioritize. If there are budget issues, these are the things you need to concentrate on this year.”

If a client is sued, the firm transitions to reactive medicine. “In a perfect world, we help our clients put policies in place that will prevent them from getting into trouble,” she says. “But sometimes, even if you do everything right ...”

Cerra’s caseload is on the smaller side by necessity. Running the firm is a hefty role. “I always say to our lawyers that they’ve got the jobs Katherin and I want,” she says. “There’s more than just being a lawyer here. We have our ‘morning huddles’ to go over workloads, see where everyone is on schedules. We’re very collegial. When I took *Jen Electric* to the Supreme Court, the whole office watched online in the conference room,” she says. “They had a big screen, popcorn ... even my parents, who were in China, woke up their poor tour guide at 2 a.m. to make him set it up so they could watch, too. It may be the most widely watched [New Jersey] Supreme Court argument in history.”

So what does Cerra hope her groundbreaking biz model will prove to her peers?

“I want to show other firms that this can be successful,” she says. “I’m concerned that our profession is not doing a good job of keeping up with change. Until men start wanting these kinds of things, the law will continue to be a hostile environment for women. I just know my children will never be on stage at a play looking for a parent who isn’t there.” ◀