

- CHARNA E. SHERMAN -

“My personal strategy, in short, was to stay vigilant about my future in every way that has made me successful in the past: to stay stridently focused on my visions, without losing sight of rigorous attention to the details.”

I launched my own firm—Charna E. Sherman Law Offices Co., LPA—on one of the most auspicious dates on the calendar: 1/1/11. To be sure, I sought to bolster my soaring optimism and exhilarating sense of empowerment by scouring the New Year’s press for mystical musings about this cosmically masterful moment in time. But, in retrospect, just as consequential was the pragmatic import of this date: indeed, buried in the voluminous partnership agreement of the Am Law 100 firm I was leaving were onerous exit provisions, imposing severe financial penalties were I to resign on any other day.

So my most earnest advice to any woman in the certain-to-be-anguished throes of whether to leave BigLaw is necessarily twofold. At the most transcendent level, I am genuinely buoyed every day by believing, deeply, that my new independence—along with a growing tide of others’—is really part of something bigger . . . of a turning point in our profession—finally—for fabulously talented women to compete seriously *and successfully* in the uppermost echelons of the law. And yet, at the same time, it is incumbent to share a practical observation: I am privileged now to leave the trappings of BigLaw success precisely because I so relentlessly applied myself to achieving that success . . . and not only in my practice, but also as a mother, wife, and daughter. I now have earned the confidence to bank not only on my record, but also on the extraordinary records of more and more women in our profession who demonstrate time and again the determination and ability to succeed simultaneously in multiple realms. In truth, we really need only do what we do best: apply our considerable talents and incredible dedication to our own futures, just as we always have to representing our clients, caring for our families, and pursuing our passions.

The Inspiration of “Defying Gravity”

Before I could even begin to contemplate the looming challenges (let alone the fine print) of leaving BigLaw, I had to convince myself that I should. Since so few women really make it up the ranks in BigLaw, every success only magnified the gravitational pull just to stay and persevere. Given my passions for advancing women in the law, I was weighed down even more by the prospect of disappointing—and the guilt of abandoning—women in my firm and others. But I experienced a moment of inspiration in, of all places, a Broadway theater, watching my struggle brilliantly played out on stage in the musical hit *Wicked*. As a career litigator, I have long combatted being typed a “witch.” So I was especially enthralled by the poignancy of the musical duel between two witches—and also two close girlfriends—over what really is good and right—and what really makes us happy—in a complex world ridden with unfair bias:

Something has changed within me
Something is not the same
I’m through with playing by
The rules of someone else’s game . . .
It’s time to trust my instincts . . .
It’s time to try
[D]efying gravity!¹

For me, their melodic debate gave not only real voice to mine, but also flight to my dreams.

Leaving Kansas

As we all know, Dorothy’s abrupt departure from home proved rather tumultuous and quite scary. So I would be remiss not to stress that leaving BigLaw required much more than inspiration; it’s been a journey that required resilience to a degree I wasn’t even sure that I had and a lot of detailed thought and planning. But in those moments when it all seemed overwhelming and more than I believed I could do well, I had to be even more vigilant in reminding myself that women from the beginning of time have changed history by successfully multitasking. And since the moment law schools opened the doors to us, we not only have zealously represented our clients, but all the while have also reared our children, spoiled our spouses, cared for our par-

1 Stephen Schwartz, *Defying Gravity*

ents, paid our bills, fixed our homes, planned our social lives, fit in exercise, and dressed ourselves in style to boot. And precisely because we insist on doing it all well, we do exactly that. So amongst the most compelling advice I got before starting out on my own is the simple truth that starting a law firm is no different: it takes time and hard work . . . just like all the other things we've had to learn and achieve in our lives.

The Ruby Slippers

The life lesson of *The Wizard of Oz* was that Dorothy always had the power: the ruby slippers were with her *all along*. But we shouldn't overlook that so was the "Good Witch of the North," who watched and guided her along her new path of self-awareness. And for me, one of the most precious treasures of my new independence has been discovering that I never was alone. Throughout this process, I turned for advice to some of the most fabulous women I know and some other incredible trailblazers I didn't; and true to form, they were all always generous with their time, their tips, their inspiration, and mostly, their extraordinary support.

And more, regardless whether we formally partner together, the legal profession increasingly has created—and even demanded we create—opportunities to "virtually" partner with one another. We each can augment our own firm capabilities with powerful and effective external networks and nimbly compete on the terms that matter most to our clients: effectiveness and value.

Over the Rainbow

For me, independence was the only way I could see my way to practicing law actually according to the principles I was raised to cherish and which I truly believe. More, my decades of work on diversity issues in the law convinced me that even the most successful women lawyers need special support to reach, stay, and excel at the very top echelons of our profession. My own experience illustrates that need, as so many helped me discover the hidden meaning of Dorothy's ruby slippers—that I always had it in my power to succeed. Indeed, the power to change our world and reach our potential lies in each of us.

So simultaneously with launching my own firm, I also decided to mark my new milestone with—and commit a percentage of my firm's profits to—a new philanthropic cause: *The Ruby Shoes Fund* supports new initiatives to empower women on the ladder of success in the legal profession, particularly strategies to help us overcome the unique challenges engendered, ironically,

by our success. As Bette Midler once said, “Give a girl the right shoes, and she can conquer the world.” And as one of my mentors once counseled me: “If you are going to go about the business of breaking glass ceilings, wear sharp shoes.”

Thus, as the sand in the hourglass reached 1/1/11 and I embarked on this exciting journey down a new yellow brick road, my personal strategy, in short, was to stay vigilant about my future in every way that has made me successful in the past: to stay stridently focused on my vision, without losing sight of rigorous attention to the details. And too, just like Dorothy, I experienced the joy of returning home but seeing it differently: indeed, ironically, this “witch of the Midwest” leased office space not only in Cleveland’s highest tower, but above my old firm. So now that I am literally building my new foundation atop their glass ceiling, I enthusiastically invite you to learn more about my new ventures at www.charnalaw.com and to defy gravity with me and so many others.

Warmest wishes.

CHARNA E. SHERMAN is president and founding partner of Charna E. Sherman Law Offices Co., LPA in Cleveland, Ohio, where she focuses on complex commercial litigation. She graduated from law school in 1985 and founded her firm in 2011. www.charnalaw.com