

Lisa Spencer

of Henson & Efron's Family Law Group

Where Intellect and Civility are Key

By Haley Freeman

When Lisa Spencer entered law school at the William Mitchell College of Law, she had an undergraduate degree in child psychology and an established career as a medical school administrator. She also had a husband, whose new career required extensive travel; a little girl entering kindergarten; and a 4-month-old baby boy.

"It was hard, but I loved learning about the law. I grew up in a town of 9,000 people in Wisconsin, and I am the first college graduate in my family. My husband supported me when he could, and we had a great community of neighbors and family who helped with the kids to let me study. We had to be very organized. We also did a lot of tag-teaming, juggling and multitasking – all skills that carry over into my practice today," Spencer said.

Spencer worked as a summer clerk in the business litigation group at Henson & Efron and became an associate after obtaining her degree. "When I went to law school, I did not want to practice family law. I was always good at tackling complex issues, so I thought business litigation would be my practice area," she said. "Then one of the family law attorneys went out on medical leave, and I agreed to cover for a while. I found that the cases were just as high-end and complex as business litigation, and I had the opportunity to get into the courtroom much sooner than I would have as a business litigator. More importantly, I also found that I could better empathize with the clients."

Seven years later, Spencer became a partner and three years after that, joined the executive management committee. "I feel that being a woman makes absolutely no difference in the way I have been treated here. I am given the same opportunities that men in the firm are given, and those opportunities are based on my intellect and abilities.



Kelli Jordan (paralegal), Melissa Nilsson (attorney), Lisa Spencer (attorney), Lisa Thoreson (paralegal), Kathryn Graves (attorney), Elizabeth Sumpton (paralegal)

I have the support of my colleagues and am encouraged to excel in my practice.”

A recognized leader in alternative dispute resolution (ADR), Spencer explains that “good lawyering is not just about how to be an effective litigator in the courtroom, it is more about how to be a creative, smart problem solver – especially in family law. I can’t think of anything worse than fighting about children in a courtroom. Who wants a third party to decide what the rest of their life is going to look like?”

Spencer strikes the right balance of friendly adversary and zealous advocate in the courtroom, and was once described as “the smiling assassin” by a former judicial officer. To that end, she is an active member of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML) and the local bar associations. She describes herself and her colleagues in these organizations as a close-knit group who make an effort to know one another personally and work together amicably in resolving family law matters.

“ADR is generally recognized as better for the family, and I think that is part of the reason why it has become so prevalent in our area,” she said. “Next to a death, the ending of a relationship is the lowest point in most people’s lives. Our local AAML chapter hosts a divorce camp each year, a CLE event that is attended by over 200 judicial officers, attorneys and experts. It has become a real bonding experience and helps us to remain cognizant that we must all participate in keeping the dignity of our clients intact.”

Henson & Efron has been ranked Best Law Firm by U.S. News & World Report and Best Lawyers for the past four consecutive years in the Minneapolis metropolitan area for family law and family law mediation. In addition, Spencer, along with several of her colleagues, was recently selected by her peers for inclusion in The Best Lawyers in America 2015 in the fields of family law. In July, she was selected to the top 50 women attorneys list as well as

the top 100 overall 2014 Minnesota Super Lawyers lists.

“There are six of us in the family law group, three women and three men. We also have four highly skilled paralegals who work at the level of second or third year associates. They are excellent drafters with whom we work very closely, creating a real cost benefit for our clients,” Spencer said.

Spencer’s female colleagues, Melissa Nilsson and Kathryn Graves, who were also named to the 2015 Best Lawyers list and selected to the 2014 Minnesota Super Lawyers list, echo her commitment to compassionate client representation. “I think we have committed ourselves to being professional and courteous to opposing counsel and judicial officers, even when we don’t agree,” Graves said. “We value and show respect to opposing parties – so much so that opposing attorneys refer cases to us and opposing spouses have been known to come back to our firm later for representation.”

The firm also places a strong emphasis on keeping pace with progressive legal doctrine. “I am in the process of expanding into artificial reproductive law, which encompasses issues like surrogacy, adoption, same sex adoption and sperm and egg donations,” Nilsson explained. “Compared to other states, Minnesota has a very liberal third-party custody statute. It is interesting that the pendulum is swinging toward a newer generation, and we are beginning to see significant innovations in the law.”

Founding partner, Robert Henson, passed away in 2012, but his legacy of honesty and professionalism remain. “Mr. Henson had a long and varied litigation career, but was most well known as a family law attorney,” Spencer recalled. “He was a stalwart in the community and a true gentleman lawyer. He created a culture where intellect and civility are key. I am very proud to be a part of that culture, and I am especially proud to be working with the exceptional women who are my colleagues.”