

The Daily Record – Permission to paint: Exploring Attorney's Artistic Side

FEATURED ATTORNEY



Sharon P. Stiller

Of Counsel

Permission to paint: Exploring attorney's artistic side

By Nora A. Jones

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Missing 13 out of 15 colors in a test for color-blindness, Sharon Stiller admits that she may see her art a little differently than some people.

"It's probably a matter of shades of related colors, but I am very likely seeing the finished product through a different lens," she says.

She believes there is a strong connection between law and the arts.

"The more human you are, the better lawyer you can be," Stiller said.

With a focus on people and portraits, Stiller might find her inspiration from sitting at a Park Avenue cafe and people-watching with a sketch pad, or from a portrait class in Steve Carpenter's studio.

Brush to canvas

Readily acknowledging she'd be an artist if she wasn't a lawyer, Stiller said, "Painting teaches you a different way to look at things, and sometimes it is easier to see the details of something that you don't have an emotional investment in."

After being away from any serious art efforts in the early part of her legal career, Stiller gave herself permission to spend time with her pencils and paint brushes.

"I took a class with local artist Chas Davis, and then progressed to Steve Carpenter's programs as I was more interested in painting people than things," Stiller said. She enjoys spending at least one night a week painting and interacting with other art students.

Stiller believes that there is a story behind each of her paintings. "Purplexing," for example, is a woman dressed in purple with a yellow background. She is just dripping with attitude, and you can tell that she stepped from a cafe into the painting. Or take the woman with the dog. Her portrait tells you that she's had a hard life, and she wants to save the puppy from having a hard life, too.

Currently, Stiller's portrait of a man in "Machu Peru" is on display at the Steve Carpenter Gallery and Art Center on Anderson Avenue, undoubtedly inspired by last year's trip to Machu Picchu, Peru.

Although she generally doesn't sell her original paintings, she does have prints made and has offered them in select venues for fundraising purposes.

"This will be my third time participating in the Volunteer Legal Services Project's Art of Lawyering," Stiller said. "I've been active on the committee since its inception in 2007, and I just love to see what creative talent comes out of our legal community."

In the beginning

As a child, Stiller won art contests and recalls drawing cartoons and enjoying grade-school art projects. However, she also made up her mind early on that she wanted to be an attorney.

"Even though we didn't really have any attorneys in the family, at 8 years old, I had the opportunity to interview Irv Kessler about becoming a lawyer," Stiller said. "Ironically, I later became Irv's partner while at Underberg & Kessler."

From an early age, Stiller has been driven to accomplish what she sets her mind to. A political science major at SUNY at Albany, Stiller pushed through undergraduate school in three years – anxious to get to law school. Working as a meat wrapper, retail associate, waitress and whatever else came along, Stiller completed her undergraduate studies magna cum laude in 1972, having also served in her school's peer justice program as chief justice of the University Student Judicial Committee.

Staying in Albany, Stiller's legal studies included a position on the law review staff and work as a legislative aide.

"During college and law school, I didn't take any art classes because I was intent on becoming a lawyer and devoted all my energy to achieving those goals," she said. "Plus, I always had to find a job to work my way through school."

Career track

A Rochester native, Stiller returned to Monroe County to work at the district attorney's office under Larry Kurlander. She was one of the first two female full-time assistant DAs in that office (the Hon. Patricia Marks was the other). With seven and a half years under her belt, Stiller went into private practice at Underberg & Kessler LLP, then known as Goldstein, Goldman, Kessler & Underberg.

She formed its employment law group in 1987, the same year she became a partner. Her expertise in the employment arena helped land her a writing contract with Lawyers Cooperative Publishing Co., where she began as a co-author of "Handling Employment Disputes in New York" (LCP 1995). She also co-

authored “Handling Drunk Driving Cases” in the late 80s.

In 2001, Stiller switched to a new title: “Employment Law in New York” (West Group 2001). More recently, she co-authored “Expert Witnesses: Employment Cases” (Thomson West 2008-2009, including a 2010 updated edition).

Her discipline and tenacity have served her well. She enjoys a challenge. She ran and completed her first marathon in 1999, and has completed five marathons. She actually placed first in her age group (but she won’t say what that is) in the Rochester marathon.

Always ready for a challenge, she agreed to become a partner when recruited by Abrams, Fensterman, Fensterman, Eisman, Formato, Ferrara & Einiger LLP. She directs their Employment Law Practice, for its Rochester, Long Island and Manhattan offices.

Stiller has lectured about employment law for the New York State Bar Association, the Monroe County Bar Association and other organizations. She advises businesses and executives about labor law compliance, represents businesses in federal and state labor department audits, and litigates employment matters.

Community Service

In addition to holding a variety of leadership roles in the past 30 years with the MCBA and Greater Rochester Association for Women Attorneys, Stiller is an active member on numerous nonprofit boards. Involved with the National Women’s Hall of Fame, the Little Theatre, Prevention First, United Way, Habitat for Humanity, Act Rochester and the Red Wings, it is hard to figure out how she has time to paint.

The opening reception of this year’s VLSP Gallery is Thursday, Oct. 6.