

Brenda Feis

Helping Employees Through Challenging Days and Beyond

by Dan Rafter



Brenda H. Feis admits she was no lover of law school. She jokes that she spent most of her time at Duke University learning she never wanted to work as a tax or corporate lawyer.

It wasn't until she took a summer internship at former Chicago law firm Rueben & Proctor that she discovered her true passion: employment law.

"Once I got involved in employment law, I really liked it," Feis says. "The workplace is such a laboratory of the human experience, and employment laws are always changing so much. There are so many perspectives on employment law. The deeper I got into it, the more I enjoyed it."

Today, Feis is known as one of the top employment lawyers in Chicago, representing plaintiffs in a wide variety of legal matters. Having spent most of her career as a defense-side employment litigator, she is now a founding partner of **FeisGoldy LLC**, the Chicago law firm that, as its tagline states, "provides smart, sophisticated representation" for

employees with workplace problems.

She is also an adjunct professor at Loyola University Chicago School of Law, teaching a course she developed on employment litigation strategy.

It would be an understatement to say employment law has been a good fit for Feis. Not only does she have a talent for the field — regularly notching favorable litigation outcomes and settlements for her plaintiff clients — she also loves it. And that, she says, makes all the difference.

"If you think about it, work is where most people spend the majority of their waking hours," Feis says. "Employment provides people with such an important part of their identity. When someone loses a job, is harassed at work, is treated unfairly in the office, it is devastating. That might sound like an overstatement, but it's not."

The rewards of this field can also be great, Feis says. She points to the many clients with whom she's worked who have lost their jobs unfairly after good, long careers.

Many of these clients were in their 50s and facing an uncertain future, wondering what their next employment steps would be.

Feis has helped many of these clients discover answers and finds it "incredibly gratifying to help people through these tough times."

"It's about helping bridge them to a better chapter in their lives," Feis says. "Often when people hit a certain age, their employers kick them to the curb. Helping someone in that situation find a better chapter, to help them leave their employer with dignity and with a financial bridge, that is rewarding. And it is usually of such immediate importance to my clients."

Clients, Lawyers Admire Skills

It's little surprise to those who know her, but Feis' dedication has left her with a long list of devoted clients. Count Colleen Scheitz as one of them.

Feis represented Scheitz in a complicated employment case, one that stretched on for

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more than two years. The case came to a close in the spring of 2014, with a jury deciding in her favor.

Scheitz, of course, is thrilled that she won. But she was even more pleased with the commitment Feis showed in working her case.

“Brenda was absolutely a godsend,” Scheitz says. “I can’t say enough about her. It’s not about whether we won. It was about the way she treated me. It was about the care and compassion she showed me. She walked me through a very difficult time in my life. She made me feel important again.”

Scheitz lives in a small suburb. Her case, though, was held in Cook County. There, Scheitz faced a large and imposing courthouse, one with hallways crowded with lawyers, plaintiffs, defendants, police officers and judges.

It was intimidating. But Scheitz says Feis never let the case become overwhelming.

“She made me feel confident,” Scheitz says. “She gave me the coping skills I needed to be able to get through that process. Cook County was a different world. There were people everywhere. There were all these long security lines. Brenda made me feel confident and at ease. That was important.”

Scheitz is far from alone. Feis has a long history of helping her clients through what are often the most challenging times in their lives.

She has represented clients who have been harassed at work, subjected to what Feis calls “absolutely horrendous” working conditions. Most of these clients were women, but Feis has also represented clients who have suffered harassment related to their ethnic backgrounds. Others clients have been retaliated against for trying to do the right thing for their employer, while others have been subjected to degrading stereotyping and discrimination.

“I don’t like letting bad actors get away with bad behavior,” Feis says. “Whether it’s a manager who is retaliating against my client or someone who has mistreated one of my clients in some other gross violation of the law, I don’t like seeing people get away with that.”

So far, employers haven’t gotten away with such behavior when they face Feis. She has an unbeaten record in litigated cases, whether during her current practice representing plaintiffs or back when she worked on the other side of the aisle defending employers.

Because of this, most employers prefer reaching settlements rather than facing Feis in court. Feis has used this truth to nab a long series of favorable settlements for her clients.

David Rowland, the managing partner

of the Chicago office of Seyfarth Shaw, has long admired Feis’ legal skills. He remembers Feis when she was a partner at the firm on the defense side of the employment law field.

Today, he knows he would hesitate before taking on Feis in the courtroom.

“Most every defense lawyer’s nightmare is the idea of trying cases against Brenda,” Rowland says. “She has been so successful for so long. Being in front of a jury with her would be a daunting task. I haven’t had that experience yet. And if I was faced with it, I would advise my client that we would have a formidable challenge to overcome Brenda’s trial skills and talents.”

Much of Feis’ success stems from her dedication and intelligence, Rowland says. But there are plenty of smart attorneys working the plaintiff’s side of employment law. What sets Feis apart, he says, is that her time spent on the defense side helped her understand how corporations think.

“She understands what makes companies tick,” Rowland says. “As an opponent in litigation, she has the advantage of knowing how, in general, corporations think. That is a great advantage to her when she is litigating a case. She knows what approaches to take.”

The Important Traits

What accounts for Feis’ incredible success? One trait that she points to is her analytical nature. She enjoys solving problems, and that’s much of what practicing law is about.

She cites her dad as a role model. Feis refers to him as a survivor, a Jewish man who made it through the Holocaust and then arrived in the United States with only a fourth-grade education. Despite these obstacles, he managed to support his family and encourage his daughter to find her path.

“Ever since I was a little girl, my dad told me three things about how to solve problems: First, you have to ask, ‘What is the problem?’ Then, ‘What can be done about it?’ And finally, ‘What can you do about it?’” Feis says.

“That has stayed with me. Being a problem-solver is really key to my personality. It’s not the only part that has helped me in my career. But I do find myself trying to instill in my children the value of solving problems, putting the puzzle pieces together. When I put those pieces together, I always hear the echoes of my father.”

Feis’ clients would also point to her dedication as one of her best traits. Feis never shortchanges her clients.

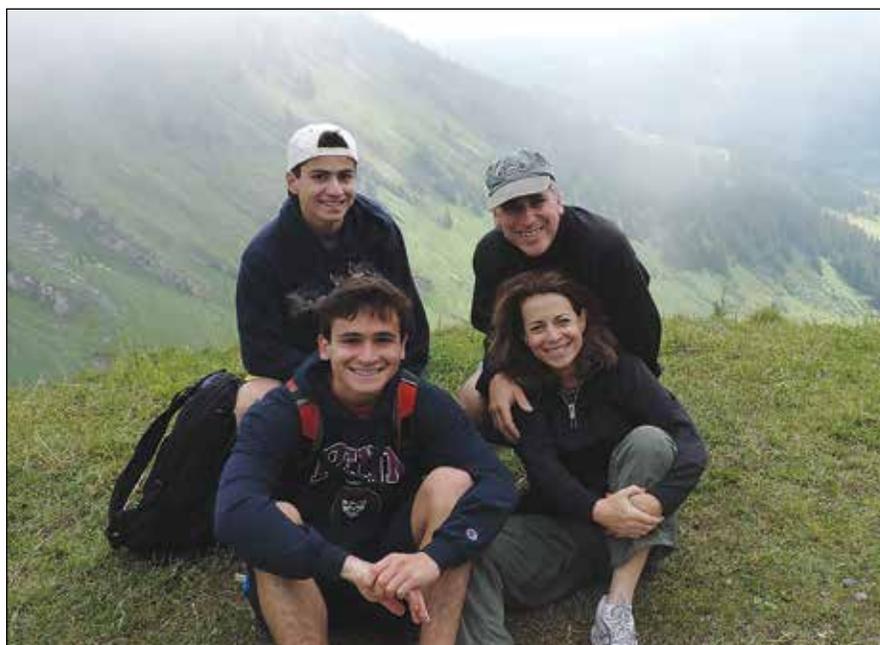
And outside the courtroom? Rowland says Feis is a pleasure to work with. She listens to others and has a natural way of building up their confidence.

“She is a wonderful person,” says Rowland. “Again, there are a lot of smart, talented people on the plaintiff’s side in employment law. But not all of them are such a pleasure to spend time with. Brenda is.”

Taking a Professional Leap

After building a strong plaintiff’s practice, Feis decided to take the leap: She,

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Pictured during a recent family hiking trip in Switzerland, clockwise from top left: son Andy, 18, husband Lance, Feis and son Ben, 20.

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along with fellow employment lawyer Jill Goldy, formed FeisGoldy.

So far, the move has paid dividends. Feis' devoted clients have followed her to her new firm and new ones keep coming.

Feis has never been afraid of bold decisions. She built her reputation originally as an employment litigator at Seyfarth Shaw, representing Fortune 100 companies in a wide variety of employment disputes. She enjoyed the work, but decided it was time for a change.

That's when she moved to Stowell & Friedman — a nationally known civil-rights class-action boutique firm — to work the plaintiff's side of employment law.

"I never would have dreamed that after leaving a defense-side firm I'd be able to develop an independent practice on the plaintiff's side where people would call me, know me and rely on me," Feis said. "That was happening, though. I was having success for those clients. I was getting good outcomes. I was winning cases."

The timing, then, seemed right for another change. And Feis says she's never been happier in her career than she is today running her boutique law firm.

"You can pick and choose your own clients, working with those you really believe have been wronged," Feis says.

"I've had a lot of conversations about a legal career with my older son, who's considering law school. I tell him that there are a lot of options you can pursue with a law degree. Big law was great for me for many years, but it's not the only path.

Despite the bad rap lawyers often get, law can still be an honorable and respectable profession. It's all about maintaining credibility and always being ethical. It's about being excellent at whatever you do, and you don't necessarily have to do that at a big law firm to have a satisfying and rewarding career."

Outside of the courtroom, Feis focuses on her family, which she calls the "love of her life." She and her husband have two sons, the oldest a junior at the University of Pennsylvania and the youngest a freshman at Stanford University. Now empty nesters, she and her husband feel blessed to have raised such wonderful sons.

Crafting a thriving legal career and raising a family are no easy tasks. Lawyers are notoriously pressed for time. Feis says she has made sacrifices during her career to make sure she was present for her sons, attending

their activities and, maybe most importantly, sitting down to dinner with them.

For Feis, it's all about setting priorities. There are times to come into the office late so you can go on a child's field trip, she says. And there are times when you need to stay up late to work on a brief after the kids go to bed.

"One of the things that moved me the most was when my college freshman had to write an essay on what matters most to him. He wrote about us having dinner together as a family every night," Feis says.

"Handling the juggling act is not easy. There have been many times when I've not gotten it right. But you do your best. It's about what values drive you. For me, making the most money and gaining the most power have never been my values. That never drove my decisions."

As Feis looks back on her career, she gives credit to her mother and father. Both always supported her, she says. Having lost both of her parents in the last three years, Feis remembers the lessons they taught her about hard work, integrity, and the importance of family.

"I would not be where I am today without them," Feis says. "I owe everything I have to them." ■