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ALL ABOUT FAMILY

Emily G. Johnston Law is passionate about helping clients through the process so they can get back to living their best lives

by LIESEL SCHMIDT / *photography by* HOLGER OBENAU

MOST KIDS GROW UP WANTING TO BE DOCTORS, astronauts, firefighters ... But for Emily G. Johnston, the desire and drive to become a lawyer was ignited as a fifth grader. "I had the idea that lawyers helped people, and that they earned a living, had an exciting life and tried cases in court," Johnston recalls of her youthful interpretation of legal life.

By high school, she still aspired to be a lawyer, but she also wanted to learn French. With that goal in mind, she majored in French at UNC Chapel Hill with plans to go on to law school. During her first year of law school, she realized that she would also need to understand money, so she entered the MBA/JD program. "I got my degrees, and I have used them to realize my dream," says Johnston, whose father was not able to graduate from high school but encouraged her to dream big and, most importantly, learn to support herself. "I have helped hundreds, if not thousands, of clients; I have watched my three children succeed through college; I have had and hope to continue having an exciting life. And I go to court! Law has afforded me the opportunity to connect with many different kinds of people. I have respected colleagues who teach me. I have mentored law students who have become great and insightful lawyers. I have business relationships that are fruitful. I did not know when I was in the library at NB Mills Elementary School learning about corporate law that I would ever practice family law or divorce law, but it is an important and crucial job."

In practice since 1985, Johnston created Johnston Family Law in 1998. At the time, she was juggling the busy schedule of launching her own practice along with raising three young children. "I needed the flexibility to be the best mother I could be and to be an effective full-time lawyer," she says. "Having my own firm afforded me the luxury of making my own schedule and working on my own cases. I loved working in a firm context, but I had to make a choice that served my children. That choice was easy in the end."

Practicing divorce and family law, Johnston also mediates family court cases. Over the past 24 years, her team has grown to include associate lawyer Tori Rhea, whose amazing way with clients has been foundational in building a relationship of trust. Rhea is talented at creating agreements and pleadings that reflect the nature of a case. She assists the team with preparing cases for trial and is also the research guru of the group. "Tori just had a baby, and we are proud that she returned to practice law," says Johnston.

Paralegal Sara von Schweinitz serves as the financial person in the office. "If there is a math question, she can answer it or find the answer, and she is always thinking about those documents that are crucial to a case. She brings her dogs to work with her almost every day, and we all love having them here; they really are stress relievers," Johnston notes.

Lauren Ur, the firm's administrative assistant, comes from a background of food and beverage. "She makes an excellent 'front of the house,'" says Johnston. "She keeps me straight. She keeps our calendars, and she runs our busy office. She is always ready to take on more responsibility, and we benefit from her enthusiasm."

Clearly, this family law firm is like a family—joined by their dedication to their clients and their passion for law. And even after nearly 40 years in practice, Johnston still has the same incredible fervor for her work that she did in the beginning. "The law is evolving, always," she says. "I focus on divorce law, and I am passionate about helping my clients through the process, approaching many of the aspects of the case as a business

decision. When it comes to creating a plan to get a person to the other side of a divorce, we learn about the client, what is important to them and how we can get the best result for them. Many times, the reward is seeing someone gain confidence through the process, having a parent develop a great relationship with their children or finding solutions that work for everyone. Of course, as lawyers, I would say that we love winning. It is always such a good feeling when the court validates the law and the set of facts with a good result. I am also dedicated to rehabilitating the practice of law to a respected profession and teaching other people that lawyers really do care tremendously about their clients and their situations, including their children."

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While Johnston's firm is not the only option in family and divorce law, clients come to her because of what she brings to the table. "I hope clients come to me because of my reputation as a wise counselor," she says. "Most of my clients come through referrals, either through friends or other lawyers, and many clients come to me because I have over 35 years of experience in family law. This is all I do. I try to be mindful of the costs of each case as well as the opportunity costs when going through a divorce. Life is short. I am a cancer survivor, and I do what I can to shorten and expedite the process so that my clients can get back to living their best lives. Their lives will be different, but they will have freedom from litigation and getting a monthly bill from a lawyer and an accountant and a guardian *ad litem*. There's a lot to be said for watching someone break free from all of that with a good settlement or trial result." *

Liesel Schmidt lives in Navarre, Florida, and works as a freelance writer for local and regional magazines. She is also a web content writer and book editor. Follow her on Twitter at @laswrites or download her novels, *Coming Home to You*, *The Secret of Us* and *Life Without You*, at amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com.



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