

'I'm Going to Ask My Mother': Here's What It's Like to Litigate With Your Mom

by Raychel Lean

For Kluger, Kaplan Silverman, Katzen & Levine associate Melissa S. Chames, practicing family law has a double meaning as she's flanked by partner Deborah S. Chames — who's also her mother.

Here's what the Miami duo say they've learned from mother-daughter litigation.

How did you end up working together at Kluger Kaplan, and in the same practice?

Melissa: I've been working with my mother since before joining Kluger Kaplan, so we already had a dynamic of working together. I worked at the law firm she owned while I was in school. I ended up moving to New York for college and law school and practiced there for a few years, but I was also a member of the Florida Bar. I ended up working with her at Kluger Kaplan when I moved down to Florida, when my husband decided to go to law school at the University of Miami. It wasn't our plan to work together, but I think the possibility was always in the back of our heads.

Funny story: on my first day working at Kluger Kaplan, I asked her, "Why



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are you doing that?" on a case she was working on. I wasn't challenging her, but she thought I was and replied, "This is not going to work out if you're going

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to be challenging me!” Now nine years later, we’re still working together.

Deborah: As a mother, I felt it was my responsibility to help her when she was moving down here. I knew she would be a big help to me and I wanted to facilitate a job for her. I believed the best possible option for both of us would be working together, so that we could help each other. Although she had experience working in other areas at her firm in New York, she’s very passionate about family law. I knew she would be a big asset to my practice at Kluger Kaplan, and I enjoy teaching and mentoring her.

What do you like most about being colleagues?

Melissa: My mother is an excellent boss. I think all associates at our firm would agree that she gives us ownership, but she’s always available when we need her. I never have to ask her, “What should I be doing?” because I’ve always felt autonomy and she’s trusted me since day one.

She’s also a very good teacher. Every single day I learn something from her. I always ask her opinion — and not just because she’s my mom. There’s a million judgement calls a day, but I always check with her. Even if I’m confident in my response, I’m always learning from her.

Lastly, one of my favorite parts is going into court when she’s not there and judges who know my mother recognize that we’re related. I remember one time a judge who recognized she was my mother said, “Great, now there’s two of you!” I get that a lot!

Deborah: As a mother, I take tremendous pride when I see how accomplished Melissa has become. She never takes a backseat — she’s always thinking about our cases. It’s rewarding from

a professional standpoint, and as her mother.

A lot of times, we talk about cases outside of work. We’re always brainstorming. And we’re not charging the client for a mother and daughter to brainstorm, so we joke that they get that added benefit!

What challenges does working together present?

Deborah: When you have four children like Melissa, someone always has to go to the doctor. I am constantly juggling the demands of my work and both of our personal lives which includes Melissa being a mother to my four grandchildren.

Melissa: Hey — that’s not fair! I email and talk on the phone while I’m at the doctor!

Our family law practice is very busy, so sometimes it’s about finding the balance between work and personal life. A lot of us on the team are moms and dads, so we understand when the other one is going through something personally. We cover for each other when unexpected issues pop up. We can’t all be machines working 24/7, which is why we work as a team.

How did you work together during the pandemic?

Deborah: Our practice never slowed down. In fact, we have been busier than ever! We were working remotely from different places, but the remote court system kept cases moving forward. We were able to attend hearings and trials remotely, and we worked well together to handle proceedings. It’s been seamless.

One of the beautiful things about our relationship at work is that she protects me during my time away. She’ll take ownership of cases. She’ll always say, “I hate to bother you” and I feel that level of protection. When she’s out, I do the same.

Melissa: For much of last year, I was working with four children at home from school, so my mother would do her best to cover for me when necessary. However, I knew she was also very busy, so I would try to do my best to help her. She was trying to take the pressure off me, while I was trying to do the same for her.

How do you apply insight from your mother-daughter relationship to your practice when working with other families?

Melissa: I feel fortunate to have such a strong dynamic with my mom. The work we do is often sensitive and deeply personal, and I think clients find comfort in knowing that they are being counseled by two women who love and respect each other. We share similar family values, which is important when you’re a family law attorney trying to understand other people and their families. We’re also both mothers and see each other’s strong work ethic even while balancing family life. Even after I had just had a baby while working at the firm, I was giving it my all, and I learned that from her.

Deborah: Clients appreciate the level of mutual respect that we have for each other. We don’t hide that we’re mother and daughter. Melissa is not afraid to say to a client, “I’m going to ask my mother.” It’s a sign of respect. We have so much professional respect for each other, and that comes through to the client.

My granddaughter (Melissa’s daughter) is 8 years old and already appreciates our working relationship. She tries to listen in on our hearings because she knows it’s mom and grandma working together. We’re hoping she takes over the practice one day!

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