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Aronberg Goldgehn Davis & Garmisa member Staci Balbirer sits on the porch at her Glencoe home. Balbirer always knew she wanted to be a family law attorney and has continued to expand her profile in her practice by taking on a 2020 Hague Convention case involving an Ecuador man filing suit against his wife who brought their children to Illinois. — Photo by Rena Naltsas

Family law attorney tackles new challenges

Staci Balbirer took on her first Hague Convention case in 2020, one of the most comprehensive things she's done in her burgeoning career.

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Being a member of the Chicago Bar Association's family law attorney referral panel provides Staci Balbirer a lot of outside communication about potential cases.

So when an email from Ecuador hit her inbox the Aronberg Goldgehn Davis & Garmisa member had to confirm this wasn't an elaborate phishing expedition.

Once Balbirer received validation this was an honest attempt for help on a complicated family law case, she dove head first into one of the most challenging cases



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she's taken on in her burgeoning career.

Balbirer quickly had to become adept at handling Hague Convention cases.

In 1993, the Hague Convention brought an international agreement protecting adoptions from other countries to prevent the abduction, sale of, or trafficking of children, according to the U.S. Department of State.

For the Hague case she took on, she initially filed it in both state and the U.S. Dis-

trict Court in Chicago. The complaint alleges her client's — a father in Ecuador — two children were abducted in January 2020 by their mother, a U.S. citizen who eventually settled in Lockport.

The case was filed in both state and federal court. After discussions with her team, including the Ecuadorian firm, Balbirer ultimately decided to proceed with it just in federal court.

That meant Balbirer, who received her law degree in 2009 from what was then The John Marshall Law School, had to be admitted to the federal bar. And, she said, the federal bar has more intense

rules and stricter judges than the ones she's regularly in front of during a divorce proceeding in Illinois.

"It's a totally different world than many divorce practitioners ever get to experience," she said. "Divorce world ... we get a lot of wiggle room. We have rules, but a good divorce practitioner argues beyond those and makes cases that are not just black and white."

In the Hague case, Balbirer didn't argue in front of U.S. District Judge Thomas M. Durkin or via teleconference. It was all written work, but Balbirer took notice and learned how to improve her work via his opinions.

"His rulings were really cool to read. They did not necessarily help my client, but I was a fan of reading them," she said. "They were unlike any sort of divorce ruling that I've seen. You've got to do things the right way with him."

In June 2020, the plaintiff voluntarily dismissed his case. Balbirer is definitely interested in taking on another Hague case if one were to come her way again. Just handling this specific case got her invited to join the Hague Convention Attorney Network, a volunteer national network run by the U.S. Department of State.

Despite knowing Balbirer since she was young because of his longtime relationship with her family, Aronberg Goldgehn member Michael A. Zaslavsky knew he was "fortunate" to bring her to the firm.

"It's been interesting watching her grow as a person and lawyer," he said. "I'm proud of her in both respects."

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They've worked together on many cases and she provides an extra level of thoroughness, he said.

"She continues to learn at rapid pace and continues to be amenable to learning. Ultimately, she's going to be a major part of our family law department," he said.

At Aronberg Goldgehn, Balbirer has excelled at taking on family law cases involving children with special needs. She said those cases require extra patience with clients, some who may call her after dinner because their home life is more stressful than the average family, especially during an ongoing pandemic.

"You have to be willing to sit and listen," she said.

With one client, Balbirer made a point to watch a client's son's work on art projects and eventually volun-

teered at the arts center.

"Immersing yourself in that person and the family's life ... it's important they trust you," she said. "There are a lot of issues when you deal with special needs children. Parents are on guard a lot. They have to deal with school and doctors. (As a lawyer) you can't be an obstacle. You have to help. Sometimes that requires extra time."

Grace M. Rohan, owner of Rohan Law who has argued cases against Balbirer, admires her dedication to doing the research and not making battles in court personal.

"She's always well-prepared. She's not showing up to court without any background," Rohan said.

Balbirer has even donned the law professor hat with a client. During the height of the pandemic, she had a case with an autistic parent who

only had an hour a week with his autistic son. Balbirer said he was very technical and wanted to know the history behind the law and arguments she was making on his behalf.

"We spent a lot of time redlining documents and agreements," she said. "He needed all that extra explanation."

She was pleased to get a strong result for her client, who received a significant increase in visitation time, allowing for more opportunities to develop a deeper relationship with his son.

Stuart G. Gelfman, a family law attorney with Birnbaum Haddon Gelfman & Arnoux LLC, has been guardian ad litem on three cases involving Balbirer. Through watching her work and getting to know her more personally — especially when they would cross paths on the downtown Metra — Gelfman recom-

mended her to join the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers.

"She's knows the law," he said. "She also looks at it the human side."

As a young woman lawyer Balbirer still sees clients coming into the Aronberg Goldgehn office only wanting to work with veteran male attorneys. But if you meet with her in the office, Balbirer will make you respect her.

She currently has a client where it took some time to reach a breakthrough. But, Balbirer wasn't going to back down.

"The first couple of times I talked with her, she would scream and yell at me," she said. "I don't take that very lightly. It got to the point where I said, 'I don't need to work with you anymore.' I stood up to her and she backed down."

"Now she only wants to work with me even though it's my partner's case."