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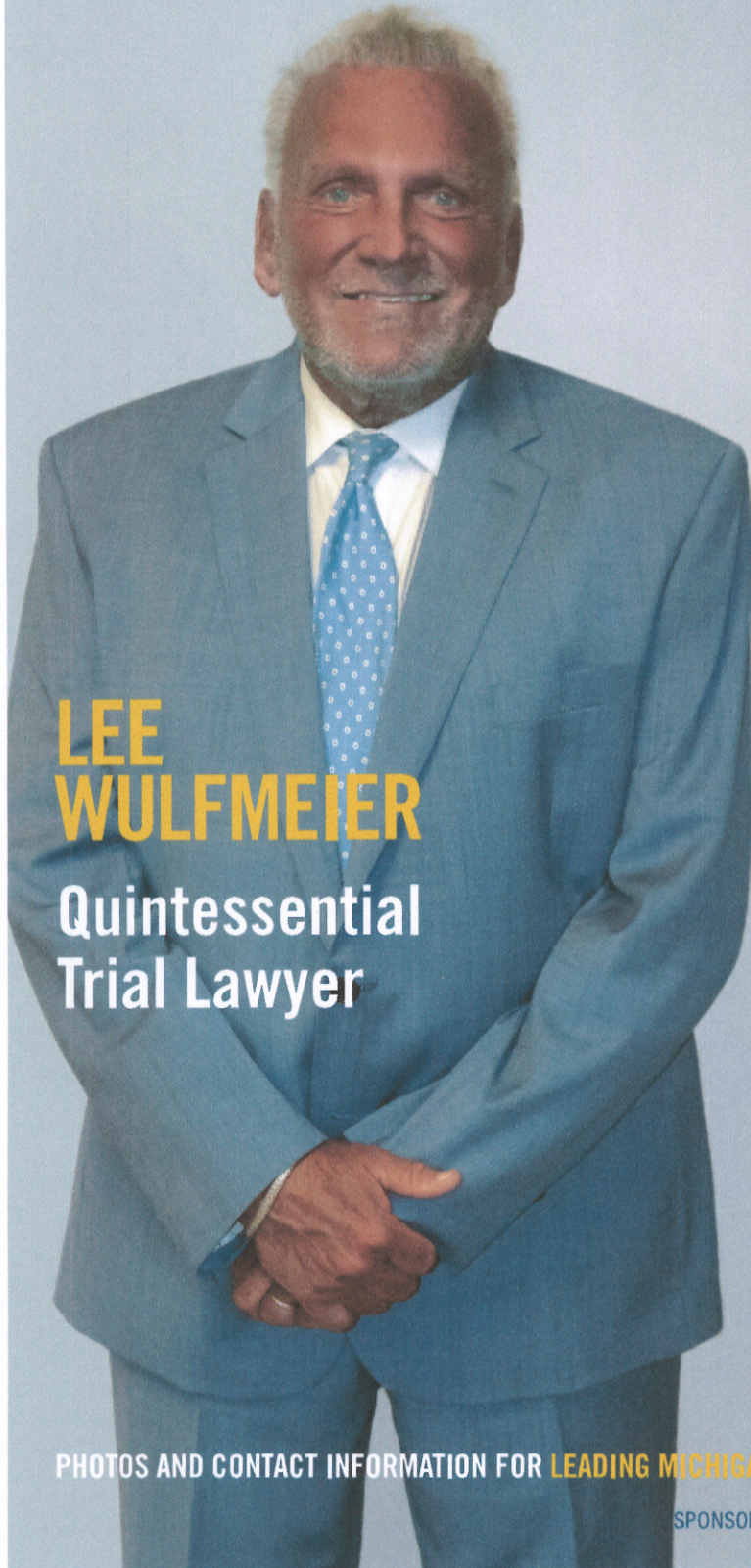


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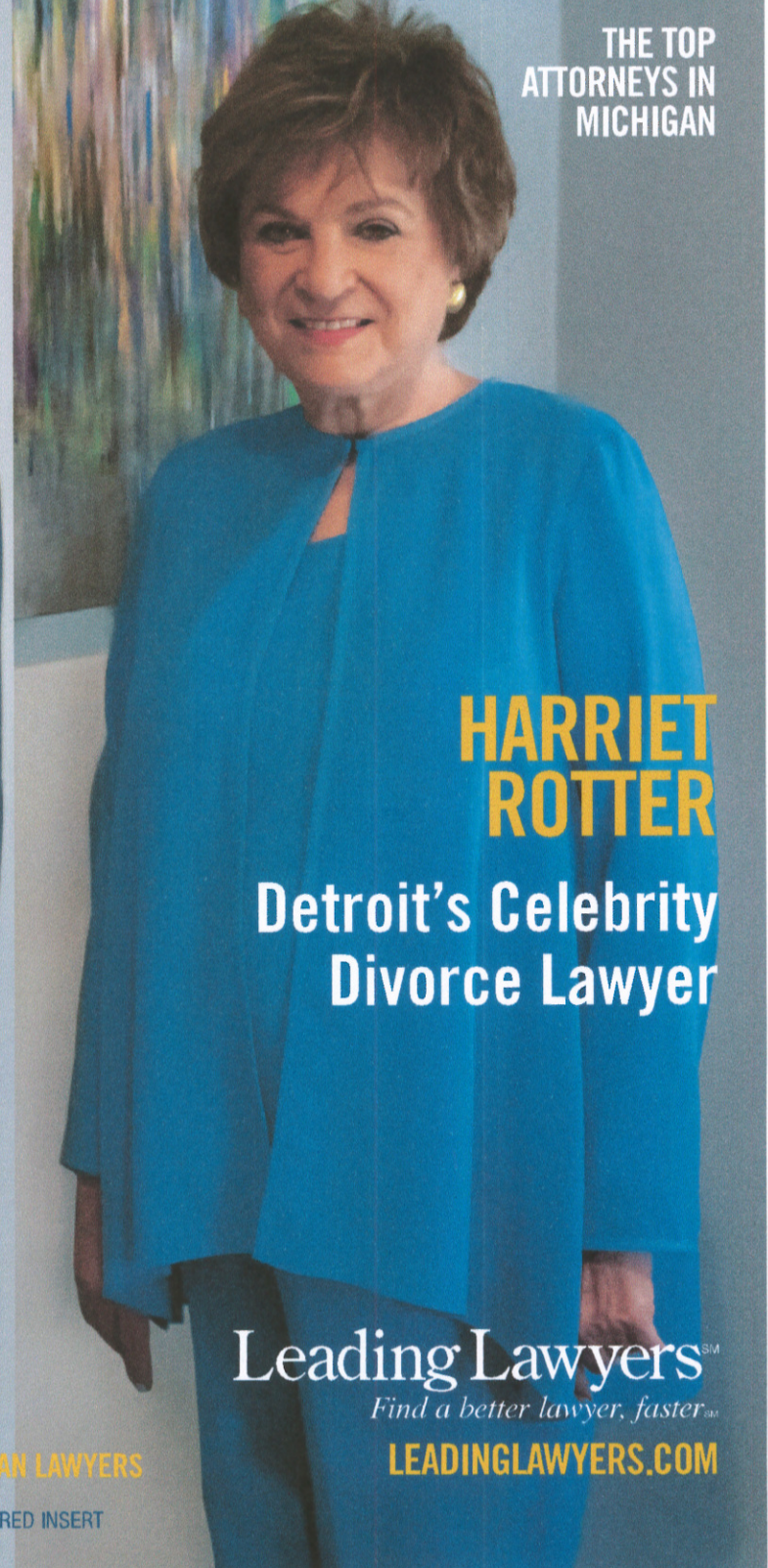
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HARRIET ROTTER

Celebrity Divorce Lawyer Uses Brutal Honesty to Help Clients Start Anew

by Dustin J. Seibert

FRANKLIN—Harriet B. Rotter approaches her job as a family lawyer with a level of exuberance that likely sets her apart from many of her peers in the field. As a result, she's earned herself something of a reputation that she's all too happy to have.

"People say Harriet doesn't represent people, she adopts them," Rotter says. "I don't know if they mean it as a compliment, but I take it as one."

Rotter is one of Michigan's premier family lawyers and co-founder of Franklin-based family law firm Rotter & Stone PC. She runs the two-lawyer business with her niece, Nancy Stone, who co-signs her aunt's reputation.

"She really approaches each case with a high degree of passion and skill, and she truly treats each client like she would a member of her own family," Stone says of Rotter.

For all the success Rotter has had in family law, becoming a lawyer was far from her first career choice: The Detroit native enrolled in Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, as a piano major.

"I heard what was going on in the practice rooms at the school and decided to switch my focus quickly," she says. "They were far above my performance level. I love playing shows, and I still play at Michigan Bar Association events, but it's very much a hobby now."

After transferring to Wayne State University, where she graduated with a history and political science degree, Rotter had a stint as a high school teacher. She also indulged a lifelong interest in politics through what she calls a "short and thrilling" run for Congress that planted the seeds for her future legal career.

"I ran at a time when districts were changing, and I was the only woman in the entire state of Michigan running for national office as a Republican in 1972, so I got a lot more attention than any first-time candidate for that reason," she says.

Her run wasn't successful. Because Rotter did a lot of volunteer work in Detroit shortly after the 1967 riots, she had encountered



many lawyers engaged in the same work there. Several of them had attended University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, motivating her to follow suit.

"Being a lawyer wasn't my lifelong ambition," she says. "I was very interested in government and politics, and I was happy teaching. But I realized that if I really wanted to be involved in change within the city, it would be better to have a law degree."

Rotter ran for Congress at the same time as L. Brooks Patterson, the current Oakland County Executive who then was running for Oakland County Prosecutor. They got to know each other through interacting at various political events.

"He told me that when I graduated from law school, assuming that my first and only attempt at national office didn't succeed, I could come work at the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office, which is exactly what I did," she says.

SERENDIPITOUS CAREER CHANGE

Rotter took the job with Patterson at the prosecutor's office but never stopped working on local, state and national campaigns. She built what she calls a "fantastic Rolodex" that opened up many professional opportunities when she started practicing law.

"I was very fortunate that I had enough name recognition from my political campaign involvement that when I first started practicing, things were sort of wide open, even though I wasn't sure what I wanted to do yet," she says.

She came upon family law serendipitously when she was asked to participate in a television debate hosted by the legendary and now deceased Detroit newscaster Bill Bonds. Rotter engaged in a debate with a male attorney regarding child custody following a divorce.

"It was a subject I didn't know a whole lot about," she says. "I'd only been out of law school a short time, and I hadn't had a case yet involving custody of children. I did a lot

of research on the topic, but it turned out it was more of a sparring contest between me and this other attorney. Fortunately, people thought I did very well."

Rotter enjoyed being on television enough to continue guest-commentating; she became a regular on the long-running morning talk show *Kelly & Company*. She gained more clients through her television appearances, representing the anchors and stars of the shows in their own divorces.

"Doing television for a lot of years allowed me to build a large book of business in family law," she says. "I loved it because it was an opportunity to interact with people, which is a big part of what attracted me to politics."

Rotter attributes the success she's had after decades in the business to two qualities. She calls the first "brutal honesty."

"I tell them like I see it. I don't sugarcoat things," she says. "If a woman walks in and says, 'My husband is a terrible man, I don't want him to ever lay eyes on the kids, I want full custody and he can send them a Christmas card,' I will immediately disabuse her of the notion that that's going to happen. I don't try to panic them, but I try to be realistic about what I think will happen in their case."

The second quality relates to that "adoption" moniker that's indelibly attached to Rotter: She routinely takes the extra steps to ensure that her clients adjust to life on the other side of a divorce—something she says many of her competitors don't bother with.

"There are too many people who, when they get divorced, don't know what to do next," she says. "They don't even know how to change the title to their car. I'll go with them to their financial adviser if necessary."

"I explain to them that this is the first day of the rest of their life. A lot of attorneys think I'm overreaching, but I just want them to be comfortable with what life looks like after such a profound change." ■