



Profile:

Betsy Koch, Esq.

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Elizabeth "Betsy" Koch has always been more inspired by the journey than the destination – a philosophy that has served her well. Her independent thinking and spirit were cultivated by her close-knit New England family. "My parents always taught me to think for myself," she says, "and encouraged me to challenge all kinds of conventions."

The small beach community of Niantic, Connecticut, which is on the north side of Long Island Sound, is where Betsy and her two brothers and sister grew up. Nestled along the shore between New York City and Boston, the population tripled in size when city folks vacationed there in the summer. Because of its proximity to Electric Boat, which designs and builds nuclear submarines, and a Pfizer central research community, the small town had more than its share of PhDs.

Betsy grew up in the 1970's, and the emergence of women in the workforce made a lasting impression on this young woman who would later become one of the few women nationwide to be a named partner in a law firm – Levine Sullivan Koch & Schulz, L.L.P. But that's her destination, and Betsy's story is always about the ride.

Citing the need for an environment that fostered independent thought and where she would feel comfortable as a woman, Betsy attended Vassar College where she was "inspired by its history and culture of critical thinking." Throughout college, Betsy thought about being an attorney – and even took the LSAT her junior year – but it was only a distant thought. "At college, I was more focused on enjoying learning than on

where my degree would ultimately take me," she says.

After graduating early from Vassar, Betsy interned a semester in Washington, D.C. for the National Abortion Rights Action League. From there, graduate studies took her "out West" to law school at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor where she was introduced to Big Ten football, but fell in love with the First Amendment. "I decided that I loved media law, but didn't think I would be able to make a living from it as a profession," she says. "The First Amendment was interesting, and I believed in it, but this interest was more theoretical at the time."

At Michigan, Betsy was recruited by Ross, Dixon and Masback (now Ross, Dixon & Bell), a small, young firm of eight litigators. Her interest was piqued by the firm's youth and size, and its location in Washington, D.C., where she had enjoyed working before. In 1985, Betsy became the firm's first summer associate, and she later accepted an offer as an associate.

Betsy enjoyed the people at the firm, but was never completely satisfied with the practice, which was primarily insurance coverage defense. But as luck would have it, a nascent First Amendment practice found Betsy when Lee Levine and Jim Grossberg joined the firm, bringing with them their media contacts – and expertise. Betsy, who still had the media bug from law school, was delighted with this development. With renewed energy, she poured her heart and soul into the Ross Dixon practice and became the firm's first "home grown" partner.

In 1997, Betsy's journey took an abrupt twist when she and her media colleagues left Ross Dixon and formed their own firm. The new firm provided a seamless transition for their media clients. "Our goal was that no one on the outside would see a difference, except for the name of the firm," Betsy recalls of the early days. "We would practice law during the day and take care

Betsy Koch, Esq. — (continued)

of the business side in the early morning, at night and on weekends.”

Almost immediately, the firm became involved in one prominent media case after another. One such case was Religious Technology Center v. Lerma, a pioneering Internet infringement suit. The RTC, which is an arm of the controversial Church of Scientology, tenaciously fought to prevent the public release of church doctrine over the Internet. Betsy and her colleagues also represented the Center for Public Integrity in a defamation suit brought by two Russian oligarchs, Alfa Bank v. Center for Public Integrity. These tough cases – taking on well-financed plaintiffs – defined the firm and strengthened the resolve of its attorneys. “The firm makes me proud,” Betsy says. “It is ‘us’ fighting the bad guys, who are trying to stifle free speech.”

And the cases keep on coming. The firm has grown to twenty-five attorneys with offices in D.C., New York City, Philadelphia and Denver. It is a preeminent firm in media and entertainment law. Betsy is especially proud of the firm’s commitment to diversity recruitment, which she believes is crucial to the media industry and to the practice of law because of the media’s global reach and influence. “Diversity is so important,” she says. “People with different ideas, backgrounds, history and cultural experiences; coming together, and sharing their ideas with each other.”

As is her way, Betsy rarely looks back. She has greatly enjoyed the adventure, challenge and freedom of starting a law practice, which neither she nor her partners had done before. “I never

thought of myself as an entrepreneur,” she says, “but I have loved the freedom to decide what the firm was going to be. We have been able to develop a culture, choose our colleagues. It’s been very important to us.”

Celeste Phillips, a partner in the firm who has known Betsy for almost 20 years, praises her business acumen. “She comes to it honestly and naturally.” Celeste says that “Betsy brings a practical, down to earth approach to running a business and to practicing law. She is our very own ‘Connecticut Yankee.’”

Betsy maintains balance by staying grounded at work and at home. She confesses – without a trace of guilt – that she is not addicted to her Blackberry (but perhaps to Sudoku!). “I love to play and love to be with my family,” she says. Betsy and her husband, Lex Gillespie, have been together since 2000 and enjoy the outdoors, traveling, and their numerous godchildren. The year after they met, the couple traveled the world, which was made possible by the firm’s sabbatical program.

Family brings Betsy’s journey full circle. Her parents recently moved from the old family home to Washington D.C. Celeste says that Betsy has the best of both worlds: “She has a family that teaches the value of being close, but also to stand on your own two feet and to make your way in the world.”

And that, she does very well.

Michelle Worrall Tilton is President and Claims Counsel at First Media.