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Connecting the dots: Attorney helps woman put her life back together



Bridget Broderick looks over documents with attorney Doug Peters. After battling anorexia and a brain injury, Broderick was considering becoming a lawyer again. Peters helped her realize she wasn't ready.

– Photo by Robert Chase

By Jo Mathis

Legal News

Bridget Broderick says she's talked to one health professional after another, but it took a lawyer to help her accept the effects of a long-time eating disorder.

“Very few lawyers would allow a brain-injured, anorexic former housewife who hadn’t worked for many years to come here, and then help her put her life back together,” said Broderick, 54, a Detroit native who now lives in Rochester.

Broderick, a mother of four, battled anorexia at 18, 38, and 48, when she was hospitalized for 13 months. Eight months ago, Broderick decided it was time to use the law degree she had earned at the age of 33 from the Detroit College of Law.

So a mutual friend asked Detroit medical malpractice attorney Doug Peters if Broderick could work in his office a bit, just to get a feel for the workplace again.

“I said sure, because we teach students and have people here all the time who are going different directions,” Peters said. “I thought I’d give her a hand. “

“Our agreement was that I was going to come here to get my feet wet and to help do some legal work,” added Broderick.

But it soon became apparent that her problems went beyond being out of the work force for years.

Those with anorexia may suffer nerve damage that affects the brain and other parts of the body, which could cause symptoms such as disordered thinking, and memory issues.

“I have no executive functioning skills,” Broderick said. “If you give me a statute, an insurance policy and a complaint, I can understand them in isolation, but can’t put them together.”

“Bit by bit, I think she began to realize that she might not be ready to become a lawyer again,” said Peters. “Recognizing what you can’t do is very difficult, because once you become a lawyer, it tends to define you. It becomes the essence of our being. She slowly and grudgingly recognized that she probably can’t be a lawyer.”

At another firm, it might have been a disaster, she said.

“They would have said something reasonable, like, ‘Bridget, we need a memo on X, Y, and Z and fax it over to this other place by 5.’ And I wouldn’t have been able to do it. And after a couple days of that, most firms would have said, ‘See ya!’ Mr. Peters didn’t.”

Had she been asked to leave, Broderick said she would have been anxious and depressed and resorted to the tool she’s turned to in the past: starving herself until she felt in control.

Now her goal for the next two years is to become a receptionist, preferably at a law firm. She also wants to do volunteer work and act as an advocate for causes.

“It took a lawyer to help a lawyer learn that she couldn’t be a lawyer,” said Broderick, who practiced criminal defense law in Ohio for about two and a half years with three other women after grad school.

“Basically what he did for me was provide me with six months of patient



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encouragement. In the kindest possible way he said, ‘You’re not connecting the dots. But the one dot you see, you’re very good at. You can use that elsewhere.’”

Peters provided another huge source of practical help when he discovered that Broderick was in the midst of a messy divorce, on her second set of lawyers, and broke.

“So, like a lot of lawyers — there’s nothing special about me — I did a pro bono thing and took on the project of helping her with her divorce,” he said.

Peters helped Broderick secure a fair settlement, which she uses to support herself

“Who takes an informal clerk, takes over her divorce because she’s going broke, and gives her hope for the future, and organizes things, and painstakingly explains things to me? Who takes that kind of time anymore?” Broderick asked.

She still shows up now and then at Peters’ office in the Hecker-Smiley Mansion on Woodward Ave., where he serves as a mentor and job coach.

“I came down here thinking I could pull it together,” she said. “And I finally realized, ‘No. You have to move on. It’s OK not to be a lawyer.’ But I’m going to be the best damn legal receptionist ever.”

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