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## IS THIS THE MOST POWERFUL WOMAN IN NEW JERSEY?

Attorney Liza Walsh reflects  
upon her rise to the top of  
her profession

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PowerPlay

By Susan Piperato

Photos by Roy Gumpel

## Is Liza Walsh New Jersey's Most Powerful Woman?

Perhaps not, if you ask her. Still, this leading commercial litigator admits, hers is an amazing life.

*Liza Walsh's journey through life has taken her from the former Yugoslavia—where she spent her childhood as a member of the Catholic-Albanian minority, to the Bronx—where she learned to speak English and got her first taste of the legal profession, to New Jersey—where she is one of the state's top litigators.*

*A partner at Connell Foley, which she joined in 1986, Walsh leads the commercial litigation practice group. She learned English as teenager in the Bronx and earned a B.S. in accounting at Manhattan College in 1981 and a J.D. at Seton Hall University Law School in 1984. A former clerk to Clarkson S. Fisher, Chief Judge, United States District Court, District of New Jersey; and Judge Charles J. Harrington, New Jersey Superior Court, Law Division, Hudson County, Walsh has served as a U.S. District Court Arbitrator and Member of the Hudson County, Essex County, Federal (Trustee, 1992 to present), and Federal Circuit Bar Associations. She is married to William T. Walsh, Clerk, U.S. District Court of New Jersey, with whom she has three sons.*

*Not only has Walsh been voted one of New Jersey's 50 Best Women in Business, but for the past five years, she has been named one of the Best Lawyers in America in Commercial Litigation.*

*New Jersey & Company met with Walsh at her Roseland and Jersey City offices this fall to talk about the ways in which her upbringing as an immigrant has brought her into the center of several of New Jersey's most powerful circles.*

Let's start with your Albanian-American background.

I was born in the former Yugoslavia, in Montenegro, which means "black mountain." My mother and father were both born in Albania. I came to the United States when I was 12. We lived in an immigration camp in Italy for two years because you couldn't come directly from Yugoslavia into the United States. Had it not been for the assistance of the Catholic Relief Services, I do not believe we would have reached the United States. I'll never forget my first English word: "Okay." Going through customs at JFK Airport, everybody kept saying, "Okay?" "Okay?" For the first six months, I walked around saying, "Okay. Okay."

My mother and father didn't have a day of formal

education, didn't speak a word of English, didn't know anybody. My father worked at a factory in the Bronx that made metal sheets. We wound up living over a synagogue in the Bronx, and he also took care of it, as building superintendent.

My parents saved some money. They bought an apartment building in the Bronx. To make a long story short, when my father passed away in 1993, he had a very healthy portfolio.

I went to Manhattan College where I was an accounting major. I wasn't sure whether I was going to get into law school so I had a fall-back position at the Federal Reserve. Then I went to Seton Hall Law School. In the Albanian community, girls are educated to a point, and expected to live at home, so I only applied to law schools I could commute to. I clerked in Hudson County for Judge Harrington, and then for Clarkson Fisher, the Chief Judge of the Federal Courts in New Jersey. I joined Connell Foley in September 1986, and I've been here ever since.

What was it like growing up Albanian?

Albanian-Americans are an incredibly hard-working people, but in many ways it is a closed society. Most of them either came directly from Yugoslavia or, in the last decade, directly from Albania because the border has opened up.

We were Albanians from Yugoslavia who were Roman Catholics. We were a real minority—that was one of the reasons my father picked up the family and left Yugoslavia. The Serbs didn't treat him well because he was Albanian, and the Albanians didn't treat him well because he was Roman Catholic. He decided he had to do whatever he needed to do to make sure his five children had better opportunities than he had and didn't live a life of oppression.

My mother and father built a house in Yugoslavia—a one-room, cinderblock structure. The government waited until the house was complete and then came and tore it down, and took my mother and father and put them in jail while we five children essentially sat there and watched and did not really know what was going on. You say to yourself, "Why did they do that?" The plain and simple answer is, because they

could. That's the kind of environment my parents came from, and they made sure that their children would not endure the same hardships, so they picked up five children and began their search for a better and freer life.

The fact that your father could actually own real estate here must have amazed him.

My parents were incredible people. You don't appreciate it when you're young, but when you reach a certain age, you look back and say to yourself, "They must have had such incredible inner strength." Think about it—picking up five kids, going to a country where you don't know anybody and you only have \$235. The incredible thing is when my mother died in '91 and my father died in '93, they had achieved one of their goals in having educated five children. They had a daughter who is a lawyer, a daughter who is a high executive at MTV New York, a son who is a banker, a daughter who is a teacher, and a daughter who worked at an old age home. As they say, only in America.

How was your adjustment to American culture?

There was no bilingual education—they put you in a classroom and you learned or you failed, one or the other. One of my earliest memories is of taking what I now know was a spelling test. The teacher distributed white sheets and asked everybody to fold them over. I didn't understand what she was saying, but I figured if I copied what everybody else did, I'd be safe. When the boy sitting next to me folded his paper, I folded my paper. He put his name down—Robert Billings; I put down Robert Billings. He put down one through 10, and 11 through 20, so I did the same thing. He continued with the spelling test. At the end of the class, the teacher asked me to go over it. I had no idea what she was saying. It turned out she could not understand why Robert Billings submitted two spelling tests. To this day, I remember Robert Billings.

Assimilating was an uphill battle. I was never bored. Every day was a challenge, and as a result, it taught me discipline and taught me how to work hard and how to stay with something no matter how difficult it is, because there is something worthwhile at the end of the process.



When did you decide to become a lawyer?

Those who know me may say that I have always been an advocate for others in some fashion or another. But my first exposure to the judicial system occurred when I was a junior in high school. My father had a tenant who wasn't paying rent, and I went to the Bronx landlord/tenant court for him. I remember this mass of people and total chaos. I said to myself, "The practice of law can't be like this, but, hey, if that's what it means, then I want to do it anyway."

There's also a rebellious side to me. In the Albanian community, for women, pursuing an education was fine, but only up to a point, because the expectation was that you got married and had children. Three of my siblings—I was the middle child of five—had arranged marriages, and they're all actually married to this day, happily. The expectation was that I would get married and have children. Eventually I did, but I wanted a career in the legal profession.

Did that first experience directly inform your law career?

No. You really don't know where you're going to wind up when you start out. I was on the hiring committee at Connell Foley for 15 years, and it always fascinated me when young lawyers came in and

said, "I want to do employment law," or "I want to do commercial litigation." It's nice to form opinions about what you think you want to do, but you really don't know at that stage what you're good at, what type of issues you'll connect with, where you're really going to thrive. Probably some of my earliest cases solidified where I wound up—in commercial litigation. They were massive cases; just navigating the various issues was an incredible experience. Probably some psychiatrist would say you can tie it into my navigating through life in the United States, given my background, but I just love commercial litigation.

You love commercial litigation's complexity.

And I love the challenge of knowing these types of cases can make or break a company. Patent infringement litigation, for example—you're handling cases that are sometimes the lifeblood of companies. The success or failure of a patent infringement claim can be the deciding factor of whether or not a company's financial well-being will continue. It's an enormous amount of responsibility, working on that kind of case; at the same time, it drives you to succeed, to deliver what your clients have entrusted you with.

Right now, my practice is primarily intellectual property cases and defending class actions.

Do you ever think, "I'm defending this big company against this small plaintiff"?

All the time. Once you get to know a client, you get to know their business, their weaknesses and strengths. You can't assume that every plaintiff's case has value or that every plaintiff's case is motivated by the desire to provide relief to an injured person. Frankly, in some of these class-action cases, lawyers can and do make an incredibly huge fee. Because of that factor, sometimes it is difficult to determine what is really driving the case. You ask yourself, "Who's the winner here? Is it the individual that got a \$30 credit or a \$30 voucher or a \$10 voucher? Or is it the law firm that got \$62 million in fees?" I'm not saying that there aren't class actions out there that have merit, but given some of the fee awards that have been made versus the recourse achieved by the plaintiffs, I do ask myself that question.

Have any specific cases impacted you personally?

Probably every single case I've ever worked on has had an impact on me. It's because of my inability to distance myself from my clients and the issues. I've always prided myself on being a true partner. If a client comes to me with a problem, I want that client to know that most of the burden has been taken off their shoulders and placed on mine. I'm the one that should be worried about their case in the middle of the night. I'm the one that should worry about the results. They should get some comfort in knowing that I'm worried about their case. Every single case I've ever worked on has had an impact on me, whether it's been the client or the adversary or the judge. My view is that you can't be a litigator and not be affected by every single case you handle. If you're just going through the motions, I don't think you're a good litigator.

You're also involved in the largest environmental cleanup in New Jersey.

It's a very significant case. Judge Cavanaugh's decision, requiring a massive cleanup and appointing a special master to over see the cleanup, is probably a landmark case. The special master has done an exceptional job in balancing the interests of the parties and making sure the area is cleaned up and someday presented to the community as a site where, hopefully, there's going to be beautiful housing, retail and recreational space. A lot of times in litigation I really don't see the end product. I know whether I've won or lost, what the opinion is, but I don't see anything concrete; here, the end result will be something very concrete and hopefully a clean site that everybody involved is going to be very proud of. The case is an example of what responsible parties can do in an area that has been contaminated for decades.

Let's talk about business. How do you see the economic crisis playing out in New Jersey?

I woke up this morning [following the first stock market plummet] and said to myself, "Why don't I feel this sense of panic and this fear?" Maybe it's because of my background. I know what it's like not to have anything. I know what it's like to live in one room with a slab of concrete as the floor. I know what it's like to live in a three-room apartment in the Bronx with seven people.

Given previous times of economic turmoil, I keep thinking it's cyclical. Every eight years or so, you've got to brace yourself for some turmoil. It's probably more gut instinct than anything else, but I'm confident we're going to get through this. At the firm, because we have a significant litigation practice and we're so diverse in the work we do, I'm really not worried. I think we're all going to come out of this. Are we going to be a bit bruised? Yes, but everybody will be.

I do think we have a true financial crisis. Some of the lending practices that were put in place in order to make some of the housing affordable, while the goal was admirable and well-intentioned, I'm not so sure those who were responsible for furthering that goal fully appreciated the potential consequences. I look at this, in a lot of ways, like the real estate issues we faced in the late '80s and early '90s, or the dot com bubble we experienced. This, too, shall pass.

You've been called one of the most powerful women in New Jersey. Why do you think people are saying that about you?

I don't know how to answer that, to be honest with you.

I didn't make it up.

Can you pass a polygraph test?

Yes!

Whenever anybody says "most" anything, you say to yourself, "Wait a minute. There is not such thing. That can't be true. That's an impossibility." Different people bring different things to the table. Maybe some people think I'm powerful—I don't know how to answer that question.

I've spent my entire life working hard. I've tried to have a very healthy home life. We have three beautiful boys who are now 14, 17, and 20. They probably think I'm powerful because they have to do what I tell them. Power is defined differently, depending on the circumstances. At the firm, people may perceive me as having a lot of power because of my active involvement in firm management. I'm the chairman of the finance committee and on the executive and management committees.

In terms of New Jersey and the practice of law, sometimes I wonder whether, if you're a female and you've just survived the system and you're left standing in the end, maybe that in itself makes you powerful. Maybe people think I'm powerful because I have staying power. Maybe it's





in how I view my clients. I will do whatever I have to do to make sure my clients get the best representation and opportunities possible.

Maybe some people think I'm powerful because I'm also on the Finance Council of the Archdiocese of Newark—I may be one of the first women to serve on that Council. Or they may think I'm powerful because I've served on corporate boards and one of my mentors was Arthur Goldberg, who was a very successful and powerful man. I learned so much from him. Others may think I derive power from practicing in federal court. I've been involved in some of the most high-profile cases, and I have developed what I hope to be a strong reputation for high quality work and integrity with the judiciary.

If you give me a task, I will get it done for you—maybe that creates a perception of power. I don't know. Let me put it to you this way—I don't think of myself as a powerful person.

That's an honest answer.

I don't recognize failure because even if I fail, I feel like I've learned something from it. I have been very fortunate and have enjoyed great success, both professionally and personally.

And your clients come back to you.

They do. And I'd like to think that my clients really know that their problems are mine and I'll give them all I have to make sure that they get the representation that they deserve. I would also like to think that my clients know that their interests always come first.

You're married to another very high-powered person—William T. Walsh, Clerk, U.S. District Court of New Jersey. How did you meet? I was working for Shanley & Fisher—now it's Drinker Biddle—for my first

summer job. I was assigned to go to the courthouse to listen to tapes for a franchise termination case. The plaintiff in the case had tape-recorded every conversation he had. As part of the defense, we had to listen to every single one of those tapes. I needed to go to the courthouse because the tapes were impounded. At the time, you could not bring a tape recorder into the courthouse, so they told me to go see Mr. Walsh and get permission from him. I pictured Mr. Walsh to be eighty years old and four foot eleven. Instead, it was love at first sight. We were married about two years later.

How did your family react?

It was difficult because I believed I would have to make a choice between Billy and my family. However, once my parents met Billy, they fell in love with him. My parents' immediate acceptance of him was one of my greatest learning experiences. Before I introduced him to my family, I feared first that my parents would face pressure from the Albanian community not to accept him and that the pressure would cause them not to appreciate how happy he made me and how much we meant to each other. The learning experience was coming to understand how much I had underestimated my parents' love for me and their desire, above all else, to see me happy, safe, and thriving. Pressure from our community did exist, requiring my parents to explain why their daughter was marrying outside of the nationality, but my happiness was much more important to my parents than any community pressure. Twenty years later it is not a big deal for Albanian women to marry American men or for Albanian men to marry American women.

How do you balance two high-powered careers with home life?

We've had a rule for our entire married life: only with rare exception do we talk about work at home. The time at home is truly sacred.

He has headed the federal courts for New Jersey since 1986. He's a very low-key human being. He doesn't like public functions; he's a quiet, powerful type, highly respected in the legal community and by the judiciary. He is, I believe, one of the longest serving clerks in the country. He got the job when he was 36 years old. He is an incredible human being. He makes things happen.

Even if we didn't have the rule about talking about work at home, we would have little time to do it. With three kids, our time away from our offices is focused on homework, sporting events, and spending quality time with our boys so we don't have too many regrets. I learned long ago as a working mother that I would always have to miss some events in my kids live's; my goal though has been to hopefully minimize this as much as possible and make up for them by spending as much quality time as I can with them.

I would not be where I am today in my life without the help of my husband. Every day is a balancing act. I couldn't do it without him. It would be impossible. I have been blessed with his support, as well as the support of all the people who enabled me to succeed in this profession: Billy at home; my partners here; the many men and women I've met over the last 20 years who've helped me along, who've opened up doors, who've made me look good when I may not have deserved to look good.

Having a support system enables me to really, hopefully, have it all. I do the best I can. But I recognize that, on any given day, something has to give. Sometimes it's my home life, sometimes it's my work life. Judge Fisher used to have a sign in his chambers that said, "Don't shoot the piano player. He's doing the best he can." That's how I feel, on any given day: "Don't shoot the piano player. I'm doing the best I can." ■■

