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Shari Blecher does  
her part to clean  
up New Jersey

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Starts on page S-6



# DON'T drink THE WATER

**Shari Blecher cleans up contaminated situations**

by **G. PATRICK PAWLING**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUIGI CIUFFETELLI

**R**eader advisory: If you're not secure with yourself and where you are in life, you may not want to read this article. Why? Because it's about a person who has gone very far very fast—and she's not done yet.

Shari Blecher runs her own eight-lawyer firm, Lieberman & Blecher, which she co-founded seven years ago; she's one of the top environmental lawyers in the state, specializing in advocating for residents and communities with contaminated groundwater; she and her husband, a surgeon, live in Princeton with their children, ages 2 and 5. She's 34.

Born in 1973 in upstate New York, Blecher is the daughter of an unlikely couple. Her outgoing mother had just finished serving with the Israeli military and was visiting the U.S. when she met her reserved father, an optometrist and an observant Jew. Somebody felt they'd be good together and introduced them. Somebody was right.

In high school, Blecher joined the tennis and ski teams and went on the road with the debate team, traveling all over the Northeast and learning skills she uses today as an attorney. She also spent many summers in Haifa, Israel, living with her grandparents, where she became fluent in Hebrew. They taught her perseverance and faith in the face of adversity, skills that helped as she went on to Binghamton University, from which she graduated magna cum laude.

"Those were some of the best times of my childhood," she says. "My time with them had a tremendous impact on me and the person I have become. They were both Holocaust survivors and both in the concentration camps—and many of their friends and family members were killed by the Nazis, including my grandfather's parents and one of his sisters."

She met her husband on the first day of school at Binghamton. His name is Haim—same as her grandfather. "It was magic from the moment we met," she says.

Their relationship reached a crossroads when she moved on to the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University in New York City. Her husband,

an orthopedic surgeon who specializes in spine surgery, applied for residencies at a hospital in Syracuse and at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. Having had enough of the upstate New York cold, she told him, "You can put Syracuse [on the form], but I don't think I will be joining you up there."

New Jersey it was.

**S**he wasn't sure what kind of law she wanted to practice once she arrived in town. She met a solo practitioner who offered her a gig handling real estate contracts. She gave it a try, but could hardly stay awake.

"I knew that wasn't what I wanted to do," she says.

She resigned and sent out several résumés, which led to an offer from a midsize firm in Newark. The job promised good money, a car and a clear path to partnership. It also included many hours and a long commute from the Princeton area. She turned it down.

Then an offer came to temp for a week at an environmental law firm where Stuart Lieberman worked. Her reaction: "Environmental law? What's that?" But at the end of her week, she was asked to stay—and she wanted to. She worked there for about a year before she and Lieberman decided to branch off on their own.

**L**ieberman & Blecher was founded in 2000 with loaned money and a lot of determination.

"We worked around the clock," Blecher says. "We'd be walking out of there at 1 a.m."

After about six months they were able to take salaries. Then they hired a secretary, who became a paralegal. Today they employ eight attorneys and the requisite administrative staff. They trust and like each other and share all major decisions, from hiring and firing to deciding on cases.

"She's unique," says Lieberman, a former deputy attorney general who represents the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. "Even at a very young age with not all that much legal experience it was clear to me she was a superstar. You wouldn't want to put money against her—ever. It's not a good idea."



Blecher seeks solace in the creek behind her home.

**B**lecher estimates that about 95 percent of the firm's business is environmental-based. For example, she often works on behalf of neighborhood and community groups and individual homeowners on cases that involve MTBE (methyl-tertiary-butyl-ether), a toxic gasoline additive that can leak from underground storage tanks into drinking water. In 2000, she teamed with the California firm Masry & Vititoe to represent Bayville homeowners in a federal lawsuit against Cumberland Farms and Chevron over MTBE contamination of groundwater. She held a community meeting in the town hall and wound up with more than 150 plaintiffs. The case settled, and while the exact terms are confidential, residents with the highest contamination levels were able to connect to a temporary water purification system before everyone was eventually connected to city water. The settlement included quality of life claims, money for medical monitoring and compensation for the resulting reduction in property values. While there were no claims of personal injuries, the settlement did leave open the option of filing personal injury claims.

Relentless prep is a Blecher hallmark. "She is always very professional," says Debra Rosen, an attorney with Haddonfield-based Archer & Greiner, who has opposed Blecher in court. "I knew I could trust what she told me and get the straight story, which is great."

**B**lecher loves working on environmental issues. "There is nothing else you can do that is better—it gives me a sense of satisfaction like nothing else," she says. "We are helping to clean up the water and air here in New Jersey. I truly believe we are helping to hold some of the industries accountable. It keeps them at least somewhat honest in their business activities."

Environmental consultant Laura Brinkerhoff, CEO of Manasquan-based Brinkerhoff Environmental Services, calls Blecher "one of the best environmental attorneys in New Jersey." Blecher, she says, is able to recognize what needs to be done and accomplish it pragmatically.

"She's extremely knowledgeable about regulations and I think she has a realistic approach to the different types of legal matters that her firm runs into," Brinkerhoff says. "She knows how to get things done."

Brinkerhoff has referred some of her clients with soil and groundwater contamination problems to Blecher for help in getting insurance companies to pay for remediation. With Blecher on the case, response somehow changed from "We can't help you" to "Oh, it seems you are covered." "That has happened time and again," Brinkerhoff says. "I tell people, 'Just because they say there's no coverage doesn't mean there's no coverage. Just call Shari.'"

Blecher does nothing to conceal her thoughts about insurance companies. "Deny, deny, deny" is their mantra, she says. "It drives me crazy ... they are coming out with record-breaking profits. You should hear me on the phone with these people. I love taking on the insurance companies."

At this point, Lieberman walks into the office, overhears her and says: "I have seen her make grown men cry."

"Some people make the mistake of misjudging her," he says. "People don't really know what they are dealing with. Every once in a while you get an older guy who thinks he's been around the block a few times and he might look at Shari and think, 'This is going to be a pushover and I'll be able to intimidate her.' It just doesn't work that way. She has got it together and she is always right on her facts."

"At the end of the day she always gets the respect she deserves." ♦