Lynne Abraham

The Softer Side of Philadelphia's "Tough Cookie"

By Tobi Schwartz-Cassell

Right: Lynne Abraham smooches up her cat, Amicus. Once homeless, Amicus now lives the good life in the Philadelphia DA's office.

With a year and a half to go as Philadelphia's longest running District Attorney, Lynne Abraham takes a look at where she's been and where she might be headed.

TSC: You just got back from the Democratic National Convention where you were a delegate. You voted for Barrack Obama, but you'd been a Hillary supporter.

LA: Yes. At first I knew nothing about Barrack Obama except that I'd heard him speak at the last DNC, and I felt he had a "wow factor" about him. I've known the Clintons for years. We're not friends but I know them. When Hillary announced her candidacy I thought, "What a great opportunity for women!"

TSC: The late Frank Rizzo dubbed you a "tough cookie." Are you sick of that moniker or do you embrace it?

LA: I embrace it. It's absolutely a true statement. I'm proud of it. It doesn't mean I'm unbending or unyielding, but to succeed in this profession you sometimes have to be strong and tough.

TSC: At 67, you're not the norm for your generation. Others your age are playing golf and babysitting their grandchildren. Any regrets?

LA: Nope. I am thrilled to be a professional woman and am planning on working and being gainfully employed for as long as I can. I love working. It's what makes my life complete.

TSC: What was your first job?

LA: When I was a little kid, my father owned a corner candy and ice cream store at 56th and Media in West Philadelphia. He hired me when I was eight and I loved it! Every day after school I'd go to the store, clean up, put things away and wait on customers. When I got older, I babysat, worked in an office - anything I could do to earn a living to pay my tuition.

TSC: What did you want to be when you grew up?

LA: As a little girl, I had no concept of what I wanted to be. When I got to be a bigger little girl I thought about being a physician. I loved everything about it. How to help people, how to heal people, how to save people. I loved it all and still do.

TSC: Why did you go into law?

LA: Poverty.

TSC: Other people's poverty?

LA: No, my poverty! I couldn't afford to go to medical school, but I could work my way through law school and that made the difference.

TSC: I hear you were confronted by one of your law school professors.

LA: When I went to (Temple University) law school, there were 135 people in my class, only two of whom were women - me and Pauline (Polly) Cohen. The professor told us, "you're taking up the space of a man."

I said, I have every intention of practicing law like everyone else. I was granted admission into this law school and I'm going to finish what I started.

Polly and I had to prove ourselves every day. But it wasn't just to him. It was the whole system that we were up against. The mindset against women was that this wasn't something you were taking up seriously; this was a game for you until you got married and got pregnant. We had to pretty much ignore it; otherwise it would have just worn us down. Polly and I did very well. She went out and practiced for years; I'm still doing well. They were all wrong. You know that old expression, 'if it doesn't kill you it makes you strong?' Well, we became strong.

TSC: Tell me about your radio show.

LA: I've been on and off the radio forever. My husband had a radio program on talk station WWDB, and I'd do his show from time to time. As a trial lawyer, I talk in front of people all the time. So being on talk radio is part of who I am. Talking. I'm on 1210, "The Big Talker" (WPHT) once a month. They wanted me to do more but I can't. I'm the DA and I can't be both things. People don't want to hear that I'm doing a radio program when they have problems they need solved.

TSC: How did you meet your husband, Frank Ford?

LA: I met him when I was interviewing radio personalities for a paper I was doing in high school, and he was one of them. Many decades later, when I was well grown up and he was divorced from his wife, we started to date. I was a judge and he was manufacturing automobiles.

TSC: How have you made your marriage endure?

LA: We've been married 31 years and they've all been good. I married a man who respected my career and wasn't threatened or intimidated by it. We are independent people, mutually respectful of each other. You read about people getting divorced, but mainly it's because they made a poor choice to begin with, and got married anyway. I was almost 37. I wasn't about to marry anybody. I had my own house, career, I didn't want to bother getting married but I made the decision to try it. And I'm glad I did. Very glad.

TSC: I hear that your staff calls your office "Wonderland." Why?

LA: I've furnished my office with my own furniture, art, tables, chairs. It's part of who I am. When people come in for a meeting, they expect to see a government-issue metal desk. I work late into the evening and on most weekends, and I wanted a special workplace with comfortable surroundings so I can do the hard work that I have to do.

TSC: I understand you have some eclectic collections.

LA: I love art, antiques, sculpture, paintings. I buy things that please my eye and bring them into the office. It works for me.

TSC: And your cats live in your office, too?

LA: Yes, though one of my cats, Miss Demeanor, died about six months ago. Very sad. One cat is still with us. She's 17 and her name is Amicus as in "amicus brief" which means "a friend of the court." I love animals and these two were foundlings. I could never turn in a found cat if I can keep it. I saw Amicus outside my office window. Someone had dumped her. She had no food, no water, so I had to get her. One day I just lured her with a can of cat food, took her to the vet and then brought her here with Miss Demeanor. We take very good care of our cat in this office. Plus, I'm always here!

TSC: Cathie Abookire, your Director of Communications, tells me that you were instrumental in lobbying Harrisburg to increase the penalties for animal cruelty.

LA: Unfortunately, Pennsylvania is known to have a lot of those terrible puppy mills where they just live horrible lives. And in Philadelphia, we've seen unspeakable acts of cruelty to dogs and cats. Dogs who are abused, abandoned, neglected, chained outside in the freezing weather with no water or food. There are cock fights, dog fights, senior citizens who hoard animals. You don't mistreat or abuse animals. Even animals who will eventually go for slaughter. I'm an advocate first for people, but in the DA's office we also recognize that many people are cruel to animals. We must treat animals properly, humanely and with great respect.

TSC: Why did you decide not to run again?

LA: I think that one of the things one has to recognize is that there are other things in life, other challenges and opportunities to explore.

TSC: So what's next for you?

LA: I've had several offers and several opportunities, but it's too soon to make a decision. I'll see how the next year and a half goes. My next position could be elective, appointed or in the private or public sector, possibly in a law office. But I don't want anyone to think I'll be diverted while I'm still DA I have to fulfill what I've been elected to do. Way down the line before I'm ready to leave, I'm going to announce where I'm going.

TSC: Anything you'd like to add?

LA: I'm an avid traveler. I love the music, language, food and culture of other countries. But I'm invested in my life in the city. It's a wonderful place to live and work and I wouldn't dream of any other place to live. I would encourage more people to come in and explore what Center City Philadelphia is all about. The music, art, dance, literature…for me to live and work in the city…well, it goes together like pickles and chips, bagels and lox, a burger and Coke. g