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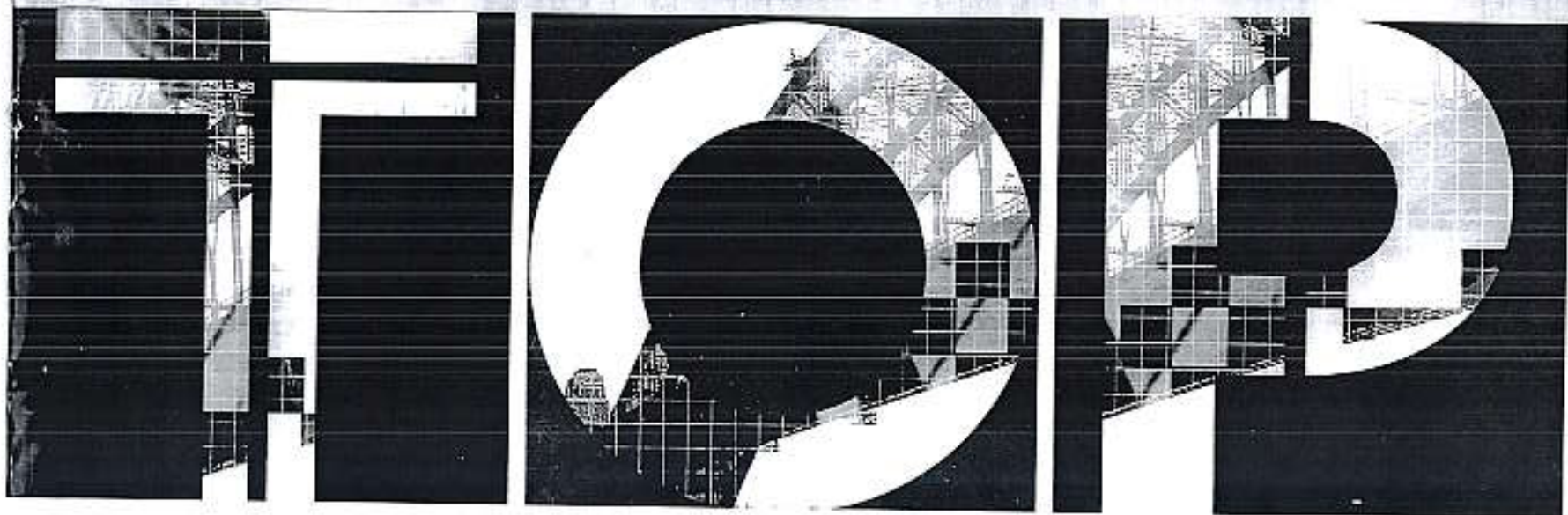
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INSIDE: 

Hobnobbing with Romney

High court, hot politics

La. auto insurance woes



Father's rights

Attorney Norma Beedle looks out for the dads in family and divorce court.

BY RANDY ROSETTA

As a young attorney, Norma Beedle knew she wanted to have an impact in family law. That aim has shaped her path for more than 20 years.

Early in that journey, Beedle realized there was an important element often overlooked as family and divorce law evolved. And the result was creating more innocent victims of divorce than was necessary, at least in her opinion.

"My observation was that fathers were being minimized in children's lives," Beedle says. "The thing that I kept thinking was, Doesn't that child have a right to have a relationship with a father?"

"Divorce is tearing families apart, and I felt drawn and compelled to do something to help. I thought if I was practicing family law, I should do something practical and helpful to families, especially when they need it the most."

With that notion serving as strong personal motivation and a new profes-

sional baseline, Beedle veered off the tried-and-true course of family and divorce law that so many other lawyers have traveled.

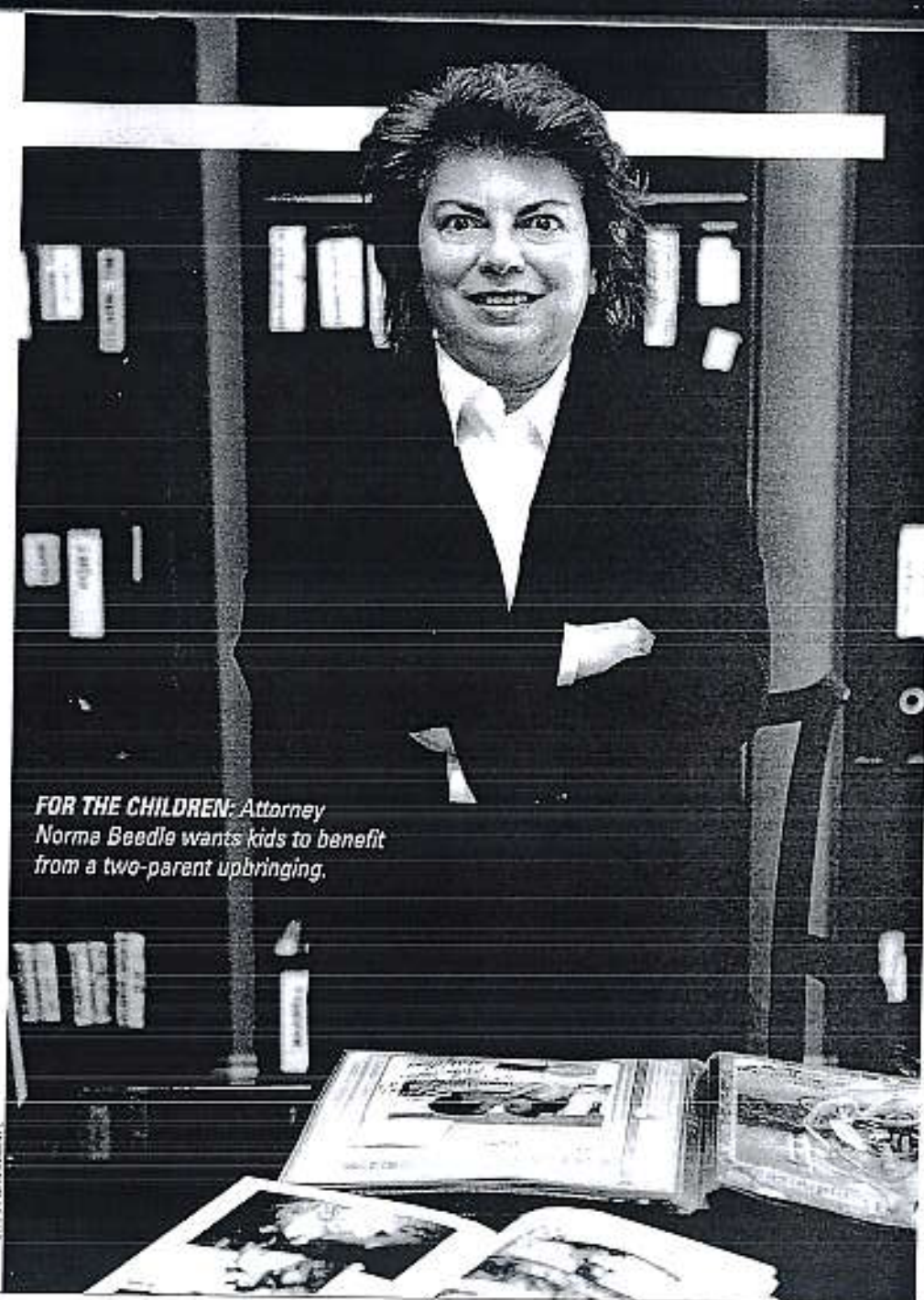
She jumped into fathers' rights law in the early 1980s while practicing in Illinois; and when she and her family moved to Baton Rouge in the late 1990s, Beedle launched a local practice that she proudly trumpets is 100% dedicated to fathers' rights.

Her philosophy is based on a handful of principles. First, kids need dads and dads need kids. Also, fathers should not settle for being part-time parents. And no matter how dire it looks and how many battles have been lost, fathers cannot allow themselves to be marginalized.

These tenets constitute more of a preamble than a statement of purpose for Beedle, though.

While it is desperate fathers who arrive at her office looking for legal assistance, the real clients are the children who benefit from the residual impact of a two-parent upbringing.

Throughout Beedle's office there are



FOR THE CHILDREN: Attorney Norma Beedle wants kids to benefit from a two-parent upbringing.

scrapbooks and photos of fathers and children together, some with testimonials included and every one complete with smiles.

"Each situation is unique, but each one has a common thread of a father who wants to be involved in his child's life," Beedle says, proudly holding one of the dozens of scrapbooks in her hands.

She flips to a page so familiar to her that the corners are bent and worn, and she points a finger at a small daughter and son embracing their smiling father.

"As much as this is about helping fathers, the best interests of my whole practice are right there," she says.

"Doesn't that child have every right to have a meaningful relationship with a father?"

To be clear, Beedle's passion isn't a camouflaged sales pitch. Yes, she makes a good living. There's more involved than money, though.

As dedicated as she is to her cause—"This is a mission as well as a business," she says—she makes it clear right off the bat to the fathers who come through her door that the hill can be steep, but the rewards immeasurable.

"She was always up-front and asked me to be up-front, too," says Jim Wells,

one of Beedle's clients who has maintained a friendship with her in the nine years since his case was decided. "My head was spinning, and I didn't know which direction to turn. I got to the point where I looked in the phone book and looked online for any help I could get. I saw her name and saw the words 'fathers' rights,' and that led me in her direction.

"The fact that she was a woman and working for fathers was impressive to me. Working with her over the period of time my case was in progress, she was not only my attorney but she became a friend."

As a woman attorney advocating for men's rights, Beedle has shaped a practice unique in the region.

While there are plenty of Baton Rouge-based attorneys who represent men in divorce and custody cases, Beedle says she doesn't know of any other lawyers in the Capital Region who focus solely on fathers' rights in those cases.

Her choice to do so sometimes triggers backlash, some subtle, some not so much.

"There is adverse reaction, especially from women and mothers who want to know, 'Why do you only represent men?'" Beedle says. "I'm not against women. I'm for kids. I just

think it's necessary and important for fathers to be involved in their children's lives from birth and every day after that.

"This particular practice exists because there is a need for fathers to have representation to make sure there's equality."

With each case, Beedle says the first goals are 50% physical custody and having an active role as a decision maker in the child's life. The longtime standard in Louisiana and most states is for fathers to be granted custody every other weekend and one midweek visit when it's not "dad's weekend," and mothers are often granted sole decision-making rights.

As her practice has grown and Beedle has impacted fathers' rights in the Capital Region, many of her clients have gone from being completely cut out of their children's lives to either domiciliary custody or full custody.

"She got my kids back for me, and now they're with me full-time," Wells says. "There's no words I can say [to express] what that means to me."

It's not only married fathers who have Beedle's attention, either.

She says Louisiana laws give unwed fathers virtually no rights to have contact and involvement with their children if the mother chooses to exclude

them. Those fathers need a judgment of paternity to have any contact at

That subset of fathers, one of the fastest growing in Louisiana—around the country—along with children who don't know or understand why their fathers are excluded from their lives—are the epitome of why Beedle latched onto this domain of law and spends so much time and energy mastering her craft.

"I realized a long time ago that getting a law degree and I can do something for people, so I'm going to fend the underdog," she says. "My mission is for every child to have the opportunity to have a father as well as a mother."

Beedle insists her practice has always been about more than making a profit for me. I want to do something positive for society, and if we get fathers more involved, I think it makes society healthier."

With a scrapbook still in her hand, Beedle flips to another page, stops, casts a long gaze at one of the dozen photos that provide her inspiration.

"When I look at these, I see how she says, 'That's what the father would work for need.'"