LAWYERS WITH PURPOSE™

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Introducing Member of the Quarter, Adrianne Peters Sipes

Clearfield, Pennsylvania is home to Adrianne Peters Sipes' law practice, Compass Estate Planning & Elder Law. An accomplished attorney, Adrianne spent the first ten years of her legal career advocating for her clients in civil and criminal matters in the court room, but today, her practice's primary focus has evolved to estate planning issues.

Her education-based approach includes hosting free workshops for the public to help individuals of all ages navigate a host of estate planning issues from the very basic to the most complex long-term care funding matters.

LWP sat down with Adrianne to talk about how her law firm has changed since becoming a member of LWP in September 2019.

Could you tell me a little about your path to becoming an estate planning & elder law attorney?

I was working in a general law practice and was doing a lot of family law, but you get burned out on that very quickly. I did a bit of estate planning, but I didn't know how complex things could get. At that time, I was in a partnership, and I wanted to try new things. I was approached by someone with a different opportunity. It was something that worked well for him, and I knew a lot of people doing this. I was 32 years old, and I had my first child. I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do in life. I knew that I wanted to try doing things on my own and have more control over my practice.

When I left that practice, I took some of the clients I had with me. I was starting from scratch and figuring things out. It was then that I connected with a friend from law school who was practicing in a couple of different states, and I ended up partnering with him for a year and doing a lot of VA planning. Together, we came upon LWP and agreed to join. I had learned about Medicaid from a situation that my family experienced, but I had no idea how to learn it. Another friend of mine, who had taken a similar path to mine with general practice, had already been familiar with Medicaid and was telling me how profitable it was. The void he had been experiencing in his own life had been filled by helping people plan.

Once my partner and I joined LWP, we were faced with a situation in which I was really into it, but he wasn't. He didn't want to follow all the processes, so I kept the membership and went off on my own. I attended fellow Pennsylvania LWP member Jeff Bellomo's workshop in person, and I spent some time talking with him. The very next day, our state was shut down with COVID. At that point, I could really dive in and go through the legal-technical portion. It took some time to do.

Had I not joined LWP, I might not have found the area of law that I truly enjoyed practicing. I didn't enjoy going to work or practicing law. As I always phrased it, "I didn't like fighting over garden tools and goldfish." I also experienced a new-found love of math. I never thought I liked math, but I enjoy going through the calculations and math involved with a five-year look-back. This was a surprise to me.

What do you believe sets your firm apart from your competition?

Having an education-based firm makes my firm unique.

People don't know what they don't know, so my clients really appreciate that I give them the background information they need and the answers that they couldn't get anywhere else. Word seems to spread, too. A client told me that he was talking to some friends about trusts, and he told them that they needed to come to one of my workshops.

Being accessible to clients when they have questions is also very important. I'm going to do a couple of bootcamps this fall, too. Style of presentation is another way that sets my firm apart. I present information so that people can understand the concepts without legalese, so that they can relate to me and realize that I'm willing and able to work with them. Beyond that, it's also the way that I am willing to work with other professionals. Typically, the professionals haven't done any advanced planning of their own or know how things work, so I've had financial advisors tell their clients that they want my firm to be involved with their planning.

How did you hear about LWP, and what made you decide to join?

A friend of mine, who practices Medicaid, had recommended both LWP and ElderCounsel, and I chose LWP. Initially, it was a budget question of making sure we could afford it.

What is your favorite part of TAPER?

Attending Practice With Purpose (PWP) as the first step is what gave me such a good grasp of Medicaid. I'm planning to attend the next TAPER.

What is the greatest success you've had since you fully engaged with LWP?

I have a few. Revenue-wise, 2021 is better than 2020, but that may be the case with many due to COVID's impact. In terms of education, I've taught many successful workshops, CLEs on estate planning topics, and 1-hour lunch and learns. I also hired a Client Service Coordinator who started last week. The biggest reward, though, is that well-known attorneys who have practiced forever and have great reputations are now contacting me for advice. They're really impressed with what I'm doing, and as some of them are winding down their practices, they're looking to send their clients to someone who will take care of them, and they're referring those clients to me. Seeing the practice get a good reputation, not just within the community, but also among my peers, has been a great success.

How tightly do you follow LWP's systems and processes?

The processes connected to guiding the client are handled very tightly, although it's hard to get some people to come to a workshop.

I'd like to be able to do more with Actionstep, and with my new Client Service Coordinator, I look forward to implementing it to a greater degree.

I probably don't follow this one aspect of LWP: We have longer meetings because we get talking, and I like to hear my clients' stories!

What is your favorite LWP tool?

My favorite tool is definitely the drafting software for the peace of mind and consistency it gives, but I also like the marketing toolkit with blog articles and other materials that allow me to gain credibility and educate the public.

What kinds of changes, if any, are you currently seeing in your market?

I'm in a unique situation in my market because in order to get an attorney who does asset planning, you have to travel one hour in one direction or two hours in a different direction. I've done a lot of marketing and have met with many financial advisors, and as a result, you realize that there are better ways of doing things; I'm seeing more people become cognizant of those issues. People know to call me to get advice. Advisors with whom I've met six to eight months ago are now calling me out of the blue and are starting to refer clients to me. They'll have three different people they want to send, and once you've helped one, it seems more and more start coming.

I've also seen a lot of changes in the nursing home administrative offices, in which you're not necessarily dealing with the same person in the administrative role. When they go from one facility to another, I'm seeing word starting to spread, and those people are becoming enlightened about these issues, too.

Do you have a client success story that you'd like to share?

I have one involving a potential client. I did a workshop recently and advertised it to people with loved ones in long-term care. During that workshop, I expanded on the subject matter and discussed certain estate planning aspects. There was a gentleman in attendance who had remained seated after the workshop with his head in his hands. When the crowd cleared, I asked him what he thought of the workshop and if I could answer any questions. He said, "My wife has dementia. It's getting pretty bad, and she isn't going to be able to stay home much longer. I thought I was going to lose everything. I'll call you when it's time."

FUN FACTS:

Share something about yourself that most people don't know.

I've got 2 boys, a 4-year-old and a 20-month-old, who keep me on my toes. I also run our local soccer association as well as the pee wee soccer program every spring and fall.

Also, I live in a town that is home to a restaurant that offers the largest hamburger in the world. It's called "Denny's Beer Barrel Pub." They offer challenges there, so, if you can finish a 6-lb burger, you can get it for free.