

# Anything a **Man** can do...

CAROLYN AGIN-SCHMIDT

*Her office waiting room is somewhat reminiscent of a Sopranos' episode*

Ask criminal defense lawyer Carolyn Agin-Schmidt if women in the law have a different experience than men in the law and she might tell you about the guy, a few months ago, who called her because of her ad in the Yellow Pages. But it wasn't legal advice he was asking for — he wanted a date, after seeing her picture in the phone book. "I don't know how many guys get women calling them

off their Yellow Pages ad asking for a date," she says with a note of sarcasm. "I don't think it happens."

Most of the men Agin-Schmidt deals with in her law practice — whether they be lawyers or clients — treat her more seriously than that caller. Just in case, Agin-Schmidt, who grew up with two older brothers, knows how to take care herself. It helps that, while growing up in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Agin-Schmidt was immersed in a world dominated by boys. While growing up, she was out there with the rest of the neighborhood kids throwing footballs, dribbling basketballs and hitting the ski slopes. "My good friends have always been guys," she says. "I feel at home in those surroundings."

Today, a wife and mother to three daughters, Agin-Schmidt also feels "at home" on the fifth floor of the Colonnade Building, where she has her own practice and enjoys a stunning view of the downtown Minneapolis skyline. But, unlike her home, her visitors there include middle-aged suburban housewives accused of shoplifting, men into S&M and child pornography, and the variety of clients that make up a criminal law practice.

She says in order to best represent her clients, she works hard to understand their side of the story. "[I] don't condone what they've done," she says. "But that doesn't mean the best thing for them is prison."

Early on in her career, Agin-Schmidt had her own mediation company. However, she found it difficult to mediate cases where someone else clearly had the

upper hand, such as a domineering husband manipulating his wife to get what *he* wants. "I'd want to say [to her], 'You don't want to do that,'" she says. "But I had to keep my mouth shut. I found that was not my forte."

She believes strongly in mentoring younger women lawyers, sometimes going to great lengths to help. For one new attorney, Agin-Schmidt spent a week assisting her in preparing for a court case. Her young friend had just passed the bar and was assigned her first case by an employer. Instead of undergoing baptism by fire, this new attorney found a savior in Agin-Schmidt, who played first chair to the new kid's second chair.

She says male attorneys have a lot to learn about mentoring young associates. "That's an important part of what I do — and something men don't do very well," Agin-Schmidt says. "When I started out, they'd throw a file at you and say, 'Go do it.' When I've mentioned it to other male lawyers, they say that's how [they] learned. That makes it OK? I don't think that's right. I think you should take the time and teach people what they should do. Not only for their sake but for the client's sake."

One of Agin-Schmidt's strengths as a lawyer is her ability to see, and empathize with, both sides of an issue. It's a skill that is completely compatible with her job as an attorney.

"It's kind of the chicken or the egg thing," she says. "I'm not sure if I'm a good fit for this job because I was that way — or if this job made me what I am." **L&P**

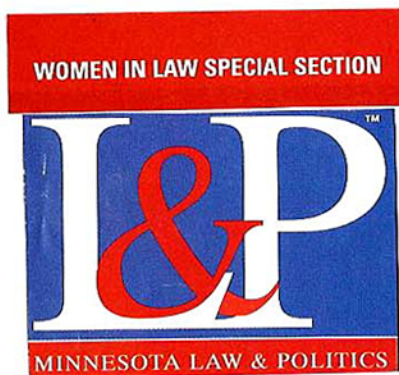
*It's Tootsie in reverse — women lawyers who work, and thrive, in traditionally male settings*

By Jolene Johnson

Photography by Larry Marcus



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