

Attorney's TV appearance put issue into focus



A 1984 photo of attorney Richard Victor with “Today Show” co-host Jane Pauley and noted psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers.

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Thirty years ago, Richard Victor was in the national television spotlight, discussing a sensitive legal subject on the top-rated “Today Show” with co-host Jane Pauley and Dr. Joyce Brothers, once considered the most famous psychologist on earth.

At the time, Victor was making a name for himself in the vanguard to assure visitation rights for grandparents and stepparents. He had been passionate about the subject from almost the onset of his legal career, which began to take shape in 1975 upon his graduation from the former Detroit College of Law.

As he began to build his matrimonial law practice in the late 1970s and early ‘80s, Victor established a local reputation for excellence in preserving custodial rights for parents in bitter divorce cases. He appeared on local TV and radio shows, trumpeting the “long term benefits for children” when divorced parents embrace the concept of “working together.”

It was a seemingly novel idea that began to gain traction as legions of grandparents and stepparents pleaded to have their voices heard in the legal arena. As a loosely knit group, they longed for an articulate spokesman who could take their message to the masses in an effort to invoke change.

Victor’s 1984 appearance on “The Today Show” may have brought the matter to a national stage, focusing attention on an issue that begged for reform.

“I’m not sure how much of a difference that appearance made, but I do know that it helped spur discussion among decision-makers, including appearances before both Congressional Senate and House committees in the early ‘80s, and that is always a positive sign,” Victor said recently in reflecting upon the 30th anniversary milestone, which coincided with the creation of the Grandparents Rights Organization, or “GRO” for short.

In the years to follow, Victor would take his message of compromise and conciliation to other TV platforms, appearing on “Good Morning America” on ABC and “The Nightly News with Dan Rather” on CBS. Even the “Jerry Springer Show” wanted to hear from the Bloomfield Hills matrimonial attorney.

By the time Oprah came calling in 1995, national television appearances had become old hat for Victor, cementing his reputation as a “voice of reason” in the rough-and-tumble world of custodial disputes.

Twenty-five years ago, Victor teamed with Oakland County Circuit Judge Ed Sosnick to create the nationally recognized SMILE program. SMILE is short for “Start Making It Liveable for Everyone” and is an educational program for divorcing parents with children under the age of 18. It is a product of Victor’s desire to be a “strong advocate for children’s rights in matters of divorce and custody cases.”

For such work, Victor was honored by the State Bar of Michigan with the “Champion of Justice Award” in 2004. It is emblematic of a host of other honors that he has received from various national, state, and county legal organizations over the course of his 39-year legal career.

His professional odyssey began, somewhat curiously, at the top - of the Penobscot Building in downtown Detroit. It was 1972 and he was a student at the Detroit College of Law looking for a clerking position. With resumes in hand, he started at the top of the 47-story skyscraper, dropping off his law leaflets to every firm in the building.

It was the proverbial tall order, but his plan worked, helping him land a job handling probate work with a Detroit firm. He then broadened his legal horizons with a stint as a clerk for a personal injury firm, where he eventually became an associate before moving into matrimonial work in his own firm. The timing coincided with the break-up of his own marriage in 1976, a painful parting that began just weeks after his first son was born.

“Going through a divorce certainly gave me a perspective that has been invaluable in serving my clients over the years,” said Victor, who indicated that he was one of the first fathers in the state to obtain joint custody in a divorce case. “While divorce may be the end of a relationship, it can have lasting implications for everyone involved, which is why we strive to help build a foundation for the new life to come.”

Victor — whose client list has included high profile ball players, entertainment celebrities, CEOs, and the like — now is in the process of another building project, this time in the dot.com world. It is a business venture he is undertaking with his two sons, Danny and Ronnie, who have been his law partners as well.

Over the span of the past two years, the father and two sons have become investors in Hippino.com, a “membership based website and app service” company founded by E.J. Falk. Victor holds the title of Executive Consultant to the company and serves on the Board of Managers, while son Ronnie is its President and his brother, Danny, is the Director of Events and Promotions.

The company, with Falk as its CEO, made its initial splash last spring. As part of the company’s marketing efforts, it sponsored a car driven by Tony Kanaan in the Indianapolis 500.

“Low and behold, first time out, our car, team and driver won the Indy 500,” Victor exclaimed. “As a result of that race and the business to business connections that were made, the company started moving in new directions, including our highly successful travel division.”

The company, according to Falk, provides “businesses with a personalized platform to communicate with customers.” In addition, a portion of every “Hippino membership fee is donated to a nonprofit organization of the member’s choice.” Members also can choose “to donate a portion of their travel booking savings to nonprofit organizations,” such as Forgotten Harvest.

The catchy company name can be traced to Falk’s 7-year-old daughter, whose favorite animal is a hippopotamus.

“We wanted a name that would translate the same in any language, as we knew we wanted to create a global company,” Victor explained.

Still, Victor isn’t giving up his day job. He has “much more work to do” in the field of matrimonial law, which has been his passion for nearly 40 years.

“There is tremendous satisfaction in ‘fighting the good fight’ and bringing light to where there is darkness, and I always want to be a part of that as a lawyer,” Victor said.