

Author Spearheads Drive to Investigate Family Court System After Suicide of Young Mother

Amy Neustein has long chronicled what she says is a family court system stacked in favor of the wealthier partner in custody battles, which often leaves women (and sometimes men) at a distinct disadvantage. Catherine Kassenoff, who was battling terminal cancer said in May her final Facebook post before taking her own life at an assisted suicide clinic in Switzerland in May that it was the court decision barring her from seeing her children that drove her to take her own life. "This is a story that ends with my own assisted death in Switzerland. Its lead up has been published for years on Facebook, in Ms. magazine and in other media.," she wrote. "The New York Court system is responsible for this outcome and should be held accountable for ruining the lives of my children, me, and so many other similarly-situated protective parents (mostly mothers) who have tried to stand up against abuse but were labeled 'liars,' 'mentally ill' and then treated like criminals."

AMY NEUSTEIN | 14 AUG 2023 | 12:46



Catherine Kassenoff, seen here with two of her three children took her own life in an assisted suicide in a Swiss clinic in May. Although she was diagnosed with terminal cancer, she claimed in a final Facebook post that it was the Family Court blocking her from seeing her three children for years that triggered her decision to take her own life at an assisted suicide clinic in Switzerland

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Former Democratic Manhattan Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney reached out to me via email back in June when Straus News reported on the story of Catherine Kassenoff—a prominent New York City lawyer and former Brooklyn federal prosecutor and special counsel to Kathy Hochul who ended her life at a VAD (voluntary assisted suicide) clinic in Switzerland in May. A family court forbade her from seeing her three young daughters in the midst of a bitter divorce and while Kassenoff was also battling terminal cancer, she said in her final Facebook post that it was the sadness from being blocked from seeing her three daughters that hastened her decision to take her own life.

Ms. Maloney's email to me read: "This is Carolyn Maloney reaching out to Amy Neustein. It's a tragic/heart breaking story. Please send me more information and the suggested letter." What the former Congresswoman was pointing to in her email was our frequent discussions in the months prior to Kassenoff's suicide about the need to get the ear of United States Attorney General Merrick Garland. In her email to me, she asked for my research report on the courts and a proposed letter to her explaining why I was asking her to reach out to Merrick Garland—namely what were the specific federal statutes that had been violated along with the civil rights abuses, criminal conspiracies, and child sex-trafficking allegations endemic to the family courts. Maloney's battle cry was echoed recently by Upper Eastside Democratic Assembly woman Rebecca Seawright (District 76). Her chief of staff called me to relay the encouraging news that Ms. Seawright had sent off my research report on alleged child-sex trafficking and child exploitation to Merrick Garland. Essentially, the family court debacle where innocent mothers (and fathers too) are robbed of their children, their life savings, and human dignity was first exposed by Manhattan Congressman Jerrold Nadler when he was a state legislator from Manhattan's upper Westside back in the 80s. Jerry, together with Bronx Assemblyman Oliver Koppell, then chairperson of the Assembly Judiciary Committee, and Brooklyn Assemblywoman Helene Weinstein, held a joint legislative hearing with the New York State Senate Judiciary Committee. The hearing lasted two full days. The Associated Press would cover this landmark event in addition to New York Newsday and the New York Post. That hearing was historic. New York was the first state in the country to hold legislative hearings on the family courts stripping innocent mothers of their children. I was very much involved in organizing the hearings by bringing to the legislature numerous case files I had collected on mothers who had lost their children. My database extended beyond New York as this was sadly a national problem. Mothers flew in from California, Florida, North Carolina, and Georgia to testify. Attorneys and mental health experts likewise flew in from distant places to testify to the scandalous abuses in the family courts. It was a cathartic event to see that activists were digging in their heels and challenging the family court status quo. In the years that followed, the New York State Assembly Judiciary Committee, headed by Nassau Assemblyman Charles Lavine, would hold hearings focusing on the tragic deaths of young children who would be shot, bludgeoned, or beaten to death because of courts so hostile to mothers that they had to denigrate their earnest pleas for protection of their vulnerable children from drug-addicted, alcoholic fathers with a history of severe domestic violence toward their ex-spouses or partners. Recently, in the town of Water Mill in the Hamptons, former Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney would be given an award by the "Mommy's Heart" Foundation at a charity event for children who have been "orphanized" by the family courts that have excised their mothers from their lives—placing these young children either in foster care or in the custody of the dangerous and abusive parent. Assemblywoman Rebecca Seawright would serve as the keynote speaker. The event was well attended by some of the most influential residents in the Hamptons who espouse a strong sense of noblesse oblige. Family Court was certainly on their mind and they came out in brutally hot weather to show their support. Now that we have two stellar women in political life firmly at the side of the embattled mother, I am certain we will get the ear of Merrick Garland—and that we will bring an end to this atrocity once and for all. New York led the way for the nation when Jerry Nadler held hearings in the late 80s. Now Ms. Seawright and Ms. Maloney have come on board. Both show conviction and passion. Not just words, but action. They have asked the Attorney General to step in. It's time for Merrick Garland to listen, and I have faith that he will!

Amy Neustein, is the co-author of "From Madness to Mutiny: Why Mothers are Running from the Family Courts—and What Can be Done about It" (University Press of New England, 2005); A follow-up book, "Mother-Mugging: The Civil Rights Crisis in the American Family Courts—and What Can be Done about It" is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.