

From victim, to advocate, to entrepreneur

Amy Neustein of Fort Lee has 'emerged from the pit'

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Dr. Amy Neustein

Amy Neustein's life has been a journey — and not an easy one.

Dr. Neustein, who lives in Fort Lee, is the daughter of a prominent Orthodox rabbi — her late father, Rabbi Abraham Neustein, was the religious leader of the Jewish Center of Brighton Beach in Brooklyn for many years. But her life changed drastically in 1986, when she learned that her 6-year-old daughter had been sexually abused by the girl's father.

Tragically for both mother and daughter, Dr. Neustein, then divorced and with sole custody of her daughter, fell victim to a family court system that seemingly placed little value on the needs of the child.

Dragged through the court system for years, Dr. Neustein reports being “threatened and intimidated.” Indeed, testifying at a New York State Senate special hearing in 1993, Dr. Neustein said that “there were over 50 hearings on whether or not I had lied, and not one hearing on whether or not my [child] was abused.” In the end, the court awarded her ex-husband sole custody of their daughter.

Broken-hearted — but increasingly aware that many other mothers nationwide had the same experience with family courts — Dr. Neustein became a tireless champion for their rights, founding HURT — Help Us Regain the Children — a legal research and advocacy center that lobbied state and federal legislators to investigate the problems in the family court system.

In a recent interview, Dr. Neustein, a Ph.D. in sociology who continues to write and speak about her experience, noted that while her journey has been painful, her “self-taught lobbying, public relations, and administrative skills, which were needed to spearhead the mothers’ movement,” are precisely what gave her the strength and knowledge to keep working for social change in other areas as well.

“I spent a decade and a half working with mothers, and I spoke to women all day long,” she said. “It sharpened my skills in understanding what people need. I listen to them and learn what will make their life better.”

Using her training in sociolinguistics, she testified in child abuse and custody cases “on the evidentiary weight of medical and psychological terminology.” She based this, she said, “on her published research on how experts make sense and order of chronic uncertainty, by looking at their conversational patterns and use of specific medical phrases.”

In 2005, Dr. Neustein and writer/attorney Michael Leshner wrote “From Madness to Mutiny,” part of Northeastern University's Gender, Crime and Law Series, to educate not just family courts but also government officials, attorneys, and judges “to see the nature and magnitude of the family court problem.” Dr. Neustein also is the editor of “Tempest in the Temple: Jewish Communities & Child Sex Scandals” (Brandeis University Press, 2009) and “Advances in Speech Recognition: Mobile Environments, Call Centers, and Clinics” (Springer, November 2010).

With her “creative juices flowing,” as she said, she later turned her attention to other scholarly and technological pursuits, creating SPA, Sequence Package Analysis, enabling computer analysis of human conversations. Through her Fort Lee-based company, Linguistic Technology Systems, she said, she is helping to make “SPA an integral part of audio data mining and interactive voice response (IVR) systems.”

Today, Dr. Neustein is engaged in a new project, designed to make the experience of using websites more user-friendly. Suggesting that we are often “hostages” to the restrictions of existing web-based forms — for example, the information on product specifications may be far removed from a picture of the product itself — she has created “a novel approach to web design.”

With what she described as a native front-end user interface, site visitors will be able to move the desired information around, receive cues to jog their memory, avoid clicking on ads by mistake, and use diagrams to help them navigate. While websites will have to subscribe to her service, Dr. Neustein is optimistic in that regard.

She is particularly hopeful that her “Smart Patient” program will be embraced by health portals. Using it would allow visitors to interact with the web page, indicating with symbols, for example, where they are experiencing pain, and moving information on medications closer to the list of ailments, to ensure that nothing is missed. In addition, she said, with the Affordable Care Act offering incentives to hospitals that are highly rated by patients, a smart patient intake form, reducing the “drudgery” for users, would help hospitals achieve patient satisfaction.

The native front-end user interface would be helpful on entertainment sites as well, she said, because users would be able to read a review of the picture they planned to see without having to leave the movie site.

On Passover — and then on Shavuot and Shabbat Nachamu — Dr. Neustein will be the special keynote speaker at the Hudson Valley Resort and Spa for “Flaky Jake's” annual holiday celebrations. She follows Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, last year's keynoter. She expects a turnout of some 800 people.

Attendees at the talk will represent many different generations. “A lot of young people are going through custody battles, expunged from the life of their children,” she said. “Talk about the feeling of captivity, of slavery. You can't cross over to the other side.” The key, she said, is to create a meaningful life. While it may not be a “good life, it shouldn't be a wasted life.”

Dr. Neustein has been invited to speak all over the world. Despite what she described as her “terribly challenged life,” she said she sees “the hand of God” in her professional success and accomplishments in the field of child abuse. That part, she said, has been “wonderful.”

She is also, finally, at peace with her relationship to the Orthodox community, which, she said, did not support her when her child was taken from her. “I decided that what I could control was my own heart, not the politics,” she said. “Once I said to myself that my anger was gone, that I won't hold it in my heart, wonderful forces came about,” such as professional success and her recent invitation to speak on Pesach.

That talk, she said, will center largely on the Joseph story, and “how to get out of the pit.” Drawing on her own experiences, she will point out that it has taken her many years to gain her “psychological freedom” after the horrors of her past. Her healing, she said, has come through scholarly pursuits and her desire to make life better for others.