

Lawyer lauded for helping special-needs kids

SECTION C

HERALDNEWS

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When she was growing up in the Hudson Valley, Michaelene Loughlin had only one goal — to get out of the classroom.

Today, she's doing everything possible to help students stay in.

Having new appreciation for education, the Bergen County lawyer works nonstop to provide special services for North Jersey school children with emotional, physical or learning disabilities.

During her youth, Loughlin never dreamed that she would be doing this kind of schoolwork during adulthood.

"I had only one goal as a child and that was to get out of school," she says with a laugh. "I found it a very oppressive place. I remember looking out the window and seeing adults walking down the street and thinking how lucky they were not to be



Rosalie Longo

where I was.

"But then, I just kept going and it got more interesting as I went along. I knew I wanted to devote my life to helping people, but I didn't think it would be helping kids who had problems with school.

"It turned out to be a perfect fit for me. Believe it or not, I ended up teaching secondary education before entering law school."

A graduate of Marillac College, St. Louis, Loughlin obtained her LL.B from Seton Hall

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Michaelene Loughlin

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University School of Law after receiving a master's from Drexel University in Philadelphia.

For the past 10 years, she has assisted disabled or emotionally disturbed children through the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act.

Some of the children she represents have bi-polar disorder. Some have autism, emotional disturbances or oppositional tendencies.

"Each child is different," she explains. "Some have challenges in understanding or using language. Some have an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations. Others have physical disabilities.

"It is not unusual for children to have multiple disabilities. Many children do fine in regular education classes with support services, such as an instructional aide and language and occupational therapy."

"Some children also require private day or residential schools to benefit from education, but this can be expensive," she says. "In these days of tight budgets, school districts can be very resistant."

Despite on going challenges in providing special services for disabled children, Loughlin finds her work fulfilling.

This week, she was honored by New Jersey Division of the United Nations Association for making a difference in the lives of youngsters in the Garden State.

In addition to being lauded for her work with children ages 3 to 21, the Prospect Park resident was honored for empowering parents to become familiar with disability laws so they can obtain educational services for their youngsters.

While she has made great strides in obtaining special services for disabled school children, Loughlin, a member of the Loughlin and Latimer law firm in Hackensack, says there is still a lot of work to be done.

What needs to be fixed?

"There are major problems in education stemming from the system of financing, which relies heavily on local property taxes," she explains. "Special education is mandated by the federal gov-

she says. "The challenges are many and varied, and I hope to meet them now and in the future."

Determined to achieve her goal, she lectures on special education for the Institute of Continuing Legal Education and for the New Jersey Bar Foundation. The latter, she says, will sponsor a free, public panel on special education law from 7 to 9 p.m. on Nov. 10 at the Law Center, 1 Constitutional Square, New Brunswick.

What inspired Loughlin to become involved in her educational work for children with learning disabilities?

"While working for Bergen County Legal Services, there was a newspaper article about me. After the story appeared, a group of parents made an appointment to see me. They all had kids in special education and were having a very hard time trying to get appropriate programs and services.

"Because their incomes were higher than the Legal Services guideline, I could not represent them, but I agreed to spend weekends helping them prepare the cases that they had hoped to present on behalf of their kids. It was a great experience for me as well as for them.

"I think it was empowering for them to be able to quote chapter and verse of the law, which entitled their children to educational services. It was also empowering for them to learn how to present cases before the impartial fact finder. Many of these parents went on to become advocates for other parents.

"In time, lower income parents did contact me, and I began to represent them in cases on behalf of their children."

Though her work is time consuming, Loughlin considers it a labor of love.

How does the busy lawyer relax or unwind after a busy day at her practice or in court?

"I love to read and see foreign and art films," she exclaims. "I also like to talk politics. Coming from a large family, I also like to play and interact with kids of all ages. It's fun and I learn a lot."