

'COMPLETELY NATURAL'

Cheryl & Esther — not just another legal firm

One wouldn't know it by the name on the door but Appell & Lenkinski, Barristers & Solicitors, is unlike any law firm in Toronto.

The young lawyers, aged 26 and 27, share space with two more established firms on the second floor of the Holiday Inn behind city hall.

Oh yes, their partners are Cheryl and Esther.

In this day of the professionally employed woman there is nothing unusual about a female lawyer. But these two have gone a step further by forming the city's first all-women law firm.

They were admitted to the bar together in 1975, a year that saw 90 new women lawyers in a field of 800.

Miss Lenkinski said there are several woman lawyers who have opened firms in partnership with men, sometimes with their husbands.

"But there is no firm in Toronto, as far as we know, where both partners are female," she said.

Appell & Lenkinski don't expect to be in this position for long. They know of at least two all-women firms opening next year.

Their firm, which has been operating for several months, deals mainly in matrimonial and criminal law.

"I certainly don't regard myself as an oddity," Miss Lenkinski said. "It strikes me funny that no one (women) has ever done this before. What we're doing is completely natural."

Being relatively new to the profession, Miss Lenkinski and Miss Appell get a great number of their cases through Legal Aid, but they have had their fair share of cases from referrals as well and they spend considerable time in court.

They like matrimonial cases the best.

Miss Appell said they are approached by men, women and couples who seek divorces. They also say they are not the least bit biased because of their sex.

"Cheryl had one case where, after she met the woman, she said she could understand why the husband couldn't live with her," Miss Lenkinski said. "She couldn't stand her."

Like all lawyers, the women have only their last names on their door and their letterhead, which causes problems.

"We still get letters marked 'Messrs.' all the time," Miss Appell said.



● CHERYL Appell, left, and Esther Lenkinski — "It's funny that no one has done this before."

"But this isn't unusual. We're no different from young men lawyers, really."

Once they were dealing with another law firm and the latter couldn't figure out how to address mail to them. The firm had a special meeting and came up with "Mesdames."

The two women want to be known as lawyers — period. But they don't mind making it known they are females, sometimes.

"Once when I was legal counsel in family court," said Miss Lenkinski, "the judge was talking to a boy on the stand and the judge referred to me as 'the lady on your left.' He then stopped himself in the middle of the word and was worried about being offensive, and then he called me 'woman.'"

Appell & Lenkinski are often asked to speak to women's groups on legal matters that deal with women. They usually accept such offers but are loathe to do a case just because they're women.

Shortly after they opened their firm two men charged with rape wanted them to handle their defence because they wanted women lawyers.

"If somebody said 'I think you're a good lawyer and would you take the case?' that would be fine," said

that even one year is bad. It's a lot harsher than what people think."

Miss Appell was recently inside a cell interviewing a man charged with possession and trafficking of drugs.

Lawyers customarily interview through a screen but this individual stuttered

"No, I wasn't scared, but I was caged!" Miss Appell said. "I didn't like the feeling."

In the offices there have been bitter disputes and emotional outbursts among clients. Sometimes the lawyer must be like a social worker to help patch things up and settle the clients down.

"You know what I've learned?" said Miss Lenkinski. "I've learned that you've got to be a lot more hardnosed about people. You learn to assess people more quickly and I don't know if that's a good thing."

As her partner said this, Miss Appell laughed.

"Esther likes to say she's hardnosed but she's really not," she said. "She's a softie."

The women know each other very well. They are close friends who see a lot of each other after office hours. They say they're the only law firm that's together on weekends.

Do they prefer dating lawyers?

"Oh-oh, we're going to get in trouble no matter how we answer that one," Miss Appell said, and the two partners broke into a good laugh.

How about marriage and a family?

Both see no reason why their legal careers should interfere if and when they become mothers.

"Listen," Miss Lenkinski said sharply. "Men have been practising law and having families for years!"

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