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Women in Business: Q&A with Amy Cheng, Partner at Cheng Cohen LLC

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Amy concentrates her practice in domestic and international commercial transactions, general corporate, and franchise, licensing and distribution law. She represents franchisors on the structuring and operation of their franchise programs through all phases of development. She also represents non-U.S. based franchisors expanding into the U.S. market.

Amy is a current member of the International Franchise Association Women's Franchise Committee, Vice Chair of the International Franchise Association's Annual Legal Symposium and an Associate Editor for the American Bar Association's Franchise Law Journal. Amy also serves as a member of the Franchise Advisory Board for the Illinois Attorney General. For her work in the field of franchise law, Amy was named a "Legal Eagle" by the Franchise Times, recognized by Who's Who Legal, Leading Lawyers, Chambers and Partners and selected by her peers for inclusion in The Best Lawyers of America® and is The Best Lawyers' 2014 Chicago Franchise Law "Lawyer of the Year".

Before forming Cheng Cohen LLC, Amy was a partner with DLA Piper US LLP and its predecessor firms. She was a member of DLA's Commercial, Corporate and Franchise & Distribution Practice Groups.

How has your life experience made you the leader you are today?

I learned early in life that nothing gets handed to you on a silver platter. We moved from Taiwan to Oklahoma when I was 8 years old. No one in my family knew how to speak English. Despite the language barrier, my father ran a successful restaurant for over 20 years, managing a large staff of employees and building strong relationships with customers despite the language barrier. My parents worked hard and taught me the value of hard work at an early age. Although my father had a difficult time communicating with his employees, he led by example. As I grew up, I realized words are hollow unless your actions support them. Transitioning this mantra to my career, when we're working on a big transaction or a new client, I roll up my sleeves and put in the long hours, just as I expect my teammates to do.

How do you maintain a work/life balance?

If you had asked me about work/life balance a few short years ago, my answer would have been two things: exercising (I'm a former marathon runner and also tried my hand at triathlons) and eating with my husband (we're foodies and love to cook and try new restaurants). While I still do make time for those, I must say our 2-year-old daughter has taken center stage. My goal is to spend as much time as possible with her, so she actually travels with me quite a bit. This might mean that if I have an hour after a meeting or in between conference sessions, you just might find me at the local park, LegoLand or practicing our Mandarin vocabulary in the hotel room. I love that I can have this consistent, regular contact with her. It's my reset button.

What have the highlights and challenges been during your tenure as a lawyer focusing on franchise law?

The highlight and challenge has been one and the same. Opening our own firm was at once scary and exhilarating. In 2007 Ric, my husband and partner, and I saw an opportunity for a different type of boutique law firm, one with 3 simple components: excellent customer service; sound legal advice for the franchise industry; and fair price. Since then I won't fib that stepping out on your own has not had been free of concern. But in these 6 plus years it has been completely exhilarating to grow to a team of 10 lawyers and have the opportunity to do amazing, meaningful work for a global roster of clients who appreciate us.

What advice can you offer young individuals hoping to enter the legal profession?

In order to be a valuable asset to your clients, you have to take the time to understand your clients and their businesses. It's our job to produce results that help our clients grow business, not create busywork that hinders their productivity. Clients do not want 50 page memos. They don't need a thesis. They want simple answers that help solve problems. My other advice is to find

a workplace that makes you happy. There are so many different places to practice law. Don't get stuck in an environment that makes you miserable. The practice of law often means long stressful hours, often spending more time with your coworkers than your family. Pick wisely so you spend your hours in an environment that's positive for you, working with people you enjoy.

What do you think is the biggest issue for women in the workplace?

I have to answer this by going back to my daughter. I think there's a huge perception that once a woman has children, people almost expect her to lose focus on her career. I think by sharing responsibility, being honest about expectations and getting creative with options, women can overcome this issue and achieve balance in work and home life. Not everyone can (or wants to) travel with their 2-year-old like I do, but options like that are out there...sometimes you just have to be willing to do something a little different. Until I had my daughter, I spent my entire adult life making my career my only priority. Working all night or canceling personal commitments were not problems. But now, I've had to figure out how to get my job done yet still be able to spend time with my daughter. Sheryl Sandberg is right when she says that "having it all" is a myth. You will not be able to have it all and there will never be the perfect balance between work and home. But by remaining flexible and being creative with your schedule, I think a woman can continue to have a successful career.

What are your thoughts on Sheryl Sandberg's 'Lean In' book and movement?

I actually really live her "being all in" work ethic. I have learned that hard work and not fearing the unknown can have incredibly positive benefits. For example, when we formed Cheng Cohen, we wanted to bring together all the positives from our combined backgrounds of corporate and private practice law, national and international. It seemed like an awfully big bite to take, but I realized that if you're completely present, focused on the task at hand and don't "leave before you leave," you become empowered and more productive. The same mindset holds true for my after-work life; when I'm with my daughter for example, I try to be completely focused on her.

I also think Sheryl's absolutely correct when she says "having it all" is a myth. It is a myth that makes women strive for the impossible. As I said earlier, I don't think it's possible to have the perfect "balance" which, to me would be to spend as much time as I want at work, have time to spend with my husband and be a full time mother. There are simply not enough hours in the day to make all those things happen every day. Therefore, life is about finding the right balance and realizing that you can't be everywhere all the time.

How has mentorship made a difference in your professional and personal life?

When I think about the people who have made the biggest impact in my professional and personal life, I keep going back to my parents. I honestly do not think I would be where I am today without them. They not only made my and my brother's education one of the highest priorities in their lives, but also relocated across the world to give us opportunities they lacked. Thinking about their sacrifices makes me try strive to do my absolute best and, I believe, has completely shaped who I am today. They are truly my best mentors.

As 'Lawyer of the Year' for franchise law, what do you hope to achieve from this platform in terms of your hopes for the future?

I am honored to have won that award but will by no means sit back and relax. I hope to use the platform as a springboard into new and exciting relationships so we can continue doing good work and producing excellent results for all clients, current and prospective.

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