

Prepared & Tough

Attorneys at boutique Riley Ersoff fight for children exposed to toxic lead

By Shane Nelson

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A little over a year ago, habitability litigator Grant K. Riley convinced one of his fiercest opponents to cross the aisle and join forces with him.

“She’s as smart as a whip. I’ve never worked with a better lawyer in my life,” Riley said of his partner, Victoria L. Ersoff. “I’ve seen some good lawyering in my day, but she’s the best I’ve ever seen.”

Ersoff spent more than two decades at Wood Smith Henning & Berman LLP, representing defendants often in habitability matters and squaring off frequently against Riley in toxic lead exposure cases.

“My husband used to just laugh when he would hear Grant and I screaming at each other on the phone,” Ersoff recalled. “We would fight like brother and sister.”

In May 2021, the duo formed Riley Ersoff LLP, not only because of the tremendous respect Ersoff had for Riley as a lawyer but also because she was growing increasingly dissatisfied with representing insurance companies and large corporations.

“I’d get this great—typically 12-0—defense verdict, and the client doesn’t say thank you. They just walk out of the courtroom,” she explained. “And then I’m literally fighting with an insurance carrier six months later to get them to pay my freakin’ bill.”

Ersoff said she knew she wanted to be a trial attorney when she was in elementary school, and she’s always loved arguing in court, but over her final few years represen-



From left: Victoria L. Ersoff and Grant K. Riley | Justin L. Stewart / Special to the Daily Journal

ting corporate defendants, she found herself developing a soft spot for the underdog.

“While taking the deposition of the plaintiff, I’d be thinking, ‘I would do a better job than that attorney on the other side, and I wish I was representing that plaintiff,’” she said. “‘That’s a person who needs help, and that’s a person who’s deserving.’ These corporations and these insurance companies have a lot of money, and to them, it’s just about the bottom line. This is a life. These are people who don’t have fair representation and are just trying to get by. They deserve so much more.”

Today, Riley Ersoff handles habitability matters involving everything

from bed bugs and cockroach infestations in poorly maintained apartment buildings to carbon monoxide poisoning and even cases involving legionnaires disease—a niche where Ersoff is especially experienced. But the four-attorney Beverly Hills boutique also handles many lead poisoning lawsuits involving young children who have suffered irreversible neurological damage because of exposure to toxic lead-based paint Riley said is found in most homes built prior to 1978.

“Even microscopic amounts of lead dust can cause neurological harm to young children, including everything from loss of IQ, ADHD, learning disabilities to aggression and

hearing loss. And if the mother is pregnant, it causes the same problems in an unborn fetus,” Riley explained. “And it’s permanent. There’s no cure for lead-based poisoning.”

Riley started his career working for larger law firms, including a long run at Frandzel Robins Bloom & Csato, L.C., but he struck out on his own in 2006 and soon found representing plaintiffs in habitability matters was especially gratifying.

“In the 20 years I was representing banks and entertainment companies and real estate developers, I never once had a client fall into my arms and cry, thanking me for the work I’d done for them—never once,” he said. “All of the clients

we represent, except in very rare instances, are as poor as they get. Generally, they are unsophisticated immigrants trying to make a better life here. They then are abused and taken advantage of by uncaring landlords. When I get justice for them, which often translates into a great settlement or a verdict, I'm changing lives. ... Helping families and their children escape poverty and escape living in slum housing conditions – it is just an amazing feeling to work with these people.”

Mentioning one of his firm's successes, Riley discussed a \$10 million settlement he got for an immigrant family from Eritrea, whose three-year-old daughter was exposed to lead paint while they lived in a South Central Los Angeles apartment building. *Mulugeta v. Famed*

Manor Limited Partnership, BC7-21639 (L.A. Sup. Ct., filed Sept. 12, 2018).

“This little girl would play by the window sill, get lead-contaminated dust on her hands, and then put her hands in her mouth – just naturally doing what babies and little kids do. And she got severe lead poisoning,” Riley explained. “She had severe autism. She could barely speak. She was socially withdrawn. She would not engage in eye contact, and she would not engage in any kind of social activity. She was a beautiful girl that just was severely handicapped.”

Riley said large verdicts and settlements are not uncommon in these types of lead cases because children who suffer from exposure to the harmful toxin generally require in-

dividualized care at home or in a private facility for the rest of their lives.

“And what we find is these cases generally settle,” Riley added. “If you have sympathetic tenants who are being abused by a landlord, and they're being forced to live in absolutely horrendous living conditions, those are not facts sharp defense lawyers want to take in front of a jury.”

Camarillo defense attorney Lisa N. Shyer has opposed Riley many times over the last five-plus years and settled most of those matters. She described him as a tough adversary who knows habitability law inside and out.

“But I do find he evaluates his cases pretty fairly and gets justifiably good results for his clients,”

Shyer said. “He doesn't back down. He evaluates his cases early and sticks with what he believes the cases are worth. ... He's put the time in, requests the proper documents, consults with the top experts and talks to his clients – which a lot of these guys don't even do. So that makes him tough because he's very well prepared.”

Both Ersoff and Riley were quick to insist, meanwhile, that they truly love their work, and the firm has expansion in mind looking ahead.

“We're definitely growing, and we're going to need to add attorneys and staff,” Riley said, mentioning the terrific fulfillment he takes from the practice area again. “Helping people in need is an unbelievable feeling. It's concrete, and it's really life-changing for our clients.”