

MAJ PACESETTER

Emily Thomas

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Bloomfield Hills attorney Emily Thomas' mom was exposed to toxic mold in her workplace and ended up disabled after 31 years as a teacher. "Watching my mom's cases gave me my first exposure to disability and worker's compensation law and motivated me to work for several attorneys during and after college. While in law school, I represented the disabled in Social Security benefit cases. My clients were individuals that clearly qualified for benefits, yet had been denied Social Security because they simply did not have the knowledge, tools, or understanding to accurately convey why they qualified for benefits. I helped obtain relevant medical records, wrote a brief for the administrative law judge, and represented the clients at appeal hearings. It was an excellent training ground for being a trial lawyer. Litigating on behalf of those with disabilities and special needs is telling the stories of people who need help – and it is a coalescence of everything I love to do," stated Thomas.

"When I was in law school, I represented a woman who had heart surgery that left her with a gaping hole under her armpit. She had to have it stuffed with mesh and no longer had full use of her arm. She lived in constant pain and embarrassment, and was unable to work in the full-time jobs she had prior to her surgery. She was denied SSA benefits several times across a decade and gave up. I requested a hearing with a Social Security administrative law judge, and after I submitted my brief and supporting documentation, the court awarded benefits without requiring any testimony. Furthermore, the judge told my client that 'her attorney' had done an

excellent job representing her. I was still in law school, but it felt amazing to be recognized as an advocate on par to members of the State Bar."

Thomas became a member of MAJ in 2012 after participating in her first mock trial. "It gave me inspiration that I could be a trial lawyer. In the end, my team won our trial. At that time I realized that there is no better feeling than having jurors make a decision based on the persuasive argument and knowledge I gave them about my client's case. I went on to compete for Wayne State on their AAJ national mock trial team."

Thomas believes it is important for trial lawyers to be a part of MAJ because MAJ helps trial lawyers learn, grow, and advocate for what they believe in. "MAJ teaches the practical aspects of practicing law, which are not taught in law school. Most importantly, it allows attorneys to learn and benefit from the know-how of members who have experienced similar obstacles. The seminars, listservers and publications all give keen insight and help answer questions. MAJ also provides member attorneys even greater tools such as mentorship, networking opportunities, and public policy resources that help us to zealously advocate for our clients and connect with the community and state lawmakers. The availability of these resources at MAJ, especially their availability to new trial lawyers, is unparalleled."

Currently Chair of the MAJ New Lawyers Committee, Thomas is also Vice-Chair of the Medical-Legal Committee at the Oakland County Bar Association, and a member of the AAJ Birth Trauma Litigation Group and the Medical Negligence Section. She focuses her career in the area of birth trauma litigation. "At Reiter & Walsh, P.C., we specialize in birth trauma and medical malpractice. We have a great team approach to our cases. Working with Jesse Reiter and Rebecca Walsh gives me even greater confidence that you need to have a strong belief in what you do and whom you represent. Every day I feel like we are making a difference in the lives of the families and children we represent."

"The first birth trauma case I worked on involved a pregnancy that had a number of risk factors for birth asphyxia. The doctors fell below the standard of care required for monitoring and management. As a result of these breaches, the child suffered brain damage. The medical terminology and expert testimony to comb through was a little overwhelming at first, but it was when I met the child that I was truly in awe of my responsibility as an attorney. I was shocked that a child with so many injuries, burdened with lifelong struggle, could have so much love, joy, and determination. I completely re-evaluated my priorities as to what matters most in life. That first child, as well as every other child I represented, taught me a lot."

Thomas is a musician, and for a time considered playing professionally. "I play the cello, piano, jazz string bass, and I also sing. I find that my clients with brain injuries, and my relatives with dementia, are extremely responsive to music. I am also an avid cook, and I really enjoy running and being outdoors. I ran the Detroit half-marathon in 2014, and I am planning to run a full marathon in 2015."