

# Super Lawyers®

2022

## THE COMPLETE AND TOTAL BADASS

Nina Pirrotti on fighting the good fight

---

**Felice Duffy's** Title IX work started with fighting for the right to play

---

**James Diamond** talks restorative justice after mass shootings



---

**Nina T. Pirrotti**  
Garrison, Levin-Epstein,  
Fitzgerald & Pirrotti  
Employment & Labor: Employee  
New Haven

---

# THE COMPLETE AND TOTAL BADASS

---

**Nina Pirrotti on fighting the good fight**

BY NATALIE POMPILIO PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF CRAVOTTA



In third grade, Nina Pirrotti learned that girls weren't allowed to carry the American flag before school assemblies. Incensed, she prepared and passed around a petition and collected dozens of names. By the end of the school year, girls were carrying the flags, too.

"Empowering the powerless, that's been a through line my entire life," says Pirrotti, of Garrison, Levin-Epstein, Fitzgerald & Pirrotti in New Haven.

As a lawyer specializing in civil rights and employee advocacy cases, Pirrotti seeks justice for clients who have been unfairly terminated, sexually harassed or assaulted, and discriminated or retaliated against.

She tends to stand out. On the "Client Experiences" tab on her firm's website, Pirrotti is described as "a ball of fire," "an inspiration and great advocate for women," and "a complete and total badass."

"She is one of the few lawyers where, at the close of a case, she gets a gift from the client," says Joseph Garrison, founder and partner at her firm. "That's an indication of how her clients feel about her."

Among the gifts: an engraved plaque that dubs her a crusader, advocate and "BB"—which stands for "bad bitch."

"I've been called a pitbull, I've been called Superwoman, but I've never been called BB, so that's a new one," Pirrotti says. "I'll take it."

Another client even wrote a poem about Pirrotti, which has since been posted to the firm's website. It begins:

*It is her passion against injustice  
that drives her to make a change  
and expose the truth.*

*She immediately becomes the voice that  
had been shunned and taken from you.*

"I cried when I received that poem," says Pirrotti, who keeps a framed copy on her credenza. "Her words captured with such beauty and power everything I hope to be as an advocate. When I need strength, I look at her photo or read that poem and I am fortified to continue fighting the good fight."

**PIRROTTI GREW UP IN BROOKLYN**, the second of four children in an Italian-American household. Her mother, Leonore, is an artist, her father, Anthony, "was one of the last of the Renaissance lawyers," Pirrotti says. "He did everything. He would on one hand defend a criminal case and on the other help someone with a divorce or a personal injury matter. He also litigated and prevailed in the first whistleblower case in the state of New York."

Most of the people who knew Pirrotti in her formative years assumed she'd be a lawyer, too. She was always advocating for someone or something.

Her best friend, Giselle Beaubrun, remembers when they were 16 and Pirrotti visited the Beaubrun family in Trinidad and Tobago. After a day at the beach, Beaubrun's habit was to put her hair in curlers and sit under a hair dryer. Pirrotti asked why. "I said, 'Because that's how mom wants it,'" Beaubrun remembers.



"DO YOU KNOW ANY  
YIDDISH? SHE'S GUTEH  
NESHOMEH, A VERY GOOD  
SOUL. ... SOMEONE WHO  
DOES WHAT'S NEEDED  
TO DO IN A LEGAL  
SETTING IN A WAY THAT'S  
COMPASSIONATE AND  
HONORABLE. SHE'S AN  
EXAMPLE OF THE BEST  
OF OUR PROFESSION."

—Nathan Goldberg, Allred, Maroko & Goldberg

"She went to my parents, 'Why don't you let Giselle cut her hair?' And they were like, 'Oh no. Absolutely not.'

"So she laid out her case. She said, 'All the time she spends under the dryer, she should be doing more productive things. She could be having fun.'"

A few days later, Beaubrun was allowed to get a haircut.

Despite such advocacy, and the assumptions, Pirrotti went in a different direction. At Wesleyan, she majored in theater, then moved to New York and settled into the struggling actor's life of auditions, waitressing shifts and receptionist gigs.

Joshua Goodbaum, one of her legal partners, wonders if this theater background doesn't help her in the courtroom. "She's great at explaining a position persuasively, calibrating her tone and approach based on the audience," he says. "She has a different approach from client to client, court to court, adversary to adversary."

But after a few years of the theater grind, she realized she was spending more time off-stage than on. "I suddenly had this epiphany that acting wasn't going to fulfill me the way I'd hoped," she says. "And I still had a passion to bring power to the powerless."

She hit Brooklyn Law School with a bang. "I was so enthused and thirsty for this education because I'd been out in the real world. I loved everything. I read everything. I knew every case," she recalls. "It got to the point that, in my civil procedure class, this big class with hundreds of students, and once again I'm raising my hand and the teacher's like, 'Anybody? Anybody but Ms. Pirrotti?'"

After her first year, she transferred to Yale Law School and earned her JD there. Her plan was to work as an associate, make a ton of money, and pay off her school loans. Two years later, she was still an associate and still had loans. So she decided to take advantage of a Yale program that would forgive a portion of loans for lawyers who went into public service—joining, first, the Manhattan Corporation Counsel's office, then moving on to the Queens County District Attorney's Office.

"You think of prosecutors as these right-wing hard-liners, conservative, lock-'em-up, put-'em-away types," Pirrotti says. "I was never that prosecutor."

Pirrotti worked in the juvenile division. The powerless she saw were most often the young people charged with crimes. "It was all about reform of the juvenile—put them in programs where we'd make sure they went to school and make sure they got drug rehabilitation counseling. Yes, in certain cases they were assigned to juvenile detention, but that was about the individual person and the individual circumstances," she says.

Pirrotti also prosecuted recidivist violent criminals. There, she says, it was about empowering victims.

"At the time the crime was being committed, this person had nothing but fear and paralysis and now they could take that back," she says. "I put them on the witness stand and watched the transformation between being fearful to a sense of, 'Oh. I can actually hold this person accountable for what they did to me.'"

Jane Manning, another ADA in Queens, calls Pirrotti "the most skillful civil rights litigator I have ever met." She remembers a domestic violence victim who had suffered years of abuse from her partner; she would make complaints to police only to drop the charges. Eventually, the man put a gun to her head while she was



Pirrotti at her '92 law school graduation; her daughter at the firm. Asked what Mommy's job was, Carina responded, "To keep me safe."

in bed and fired it; she only survived by moving at the last moment. The woman testified before a grand jury, which indicted the man.

Then the woman submitted a typewritten recantation letter.

Pirrotti went into investigator mode—interviewing the officers who responded to her calls and pulling medical records to document the abuse the victim had suffered. She also found that the typewriter used in the recantation letter was the same model in the accused's jail cell.

"Nina put forward a case so compelling that, even without the victim's testimony, this man realized his best bet was to take a plea deal," says Manning, now the founder and director of the nonprofit Women's Equal Justice Project. "She investigated this case like it was a homicide. And that's why it didn't become a homicide."

Pirrotti had a "victim-centered" practice long before the term was coined, Manning says. Manning once had a witness, an armed robbery victim, show up ready to testify in short sleeves that revealed "an aggressive tattoo on one of his arms."

"I said to Nina, 'What am I going to do? The jury's going to get this horrible first impression that really doesn't square with who he is.' Nina agreed, 'You can't put him on the stand like that.' Then she went up and down the hallway until she found a male prosecutor who had a shirt the same size and she talked him into giving up his own shirt for the witness to wear," Manning says. "You've heard that a good friend is someone who will give you the shirt off their back? Well, it takes a special friend to talk the shirt off someone else's back. Nina Pirrotti is that kind of friend."

Nathan Goldberg, who has co-counseled with Pirrotti, remembers her suggestion that they visit the home of a client who had been the victim of a sexual assault.

"Most lawyers wouldn't even think of doing something like that, but Nina said, 'Let's get a better sense of who she is and how she lives, not just what she says in the office.' And it was extraordinary," recalls Goldberg, a partner in California-based Allred, Maroko & Goldberg. "Do you know any Yiddish? She's *guteh neshomeh*, a very good soul," Goldberg continues. "I've been a lawyer for 47 years and I'd put her in the top one percent, maybe half percent, for overall competency and decency. She's someone who does what's needed to do in a legal setting in a way that's compassionate and honorable. She's an example of the best of our profession."

Robert Levy, a partner in New York's Bantle & Levy, had a similar experience. They were negotiating a settlement for a former employee of a large company, and the company's lawyers argued that the business was having financial problems.



Several firms turned down Stephanie Edwards' case but Pirrotti secured a \$1.75 million settlement. "She had me under her wing," Edwards remembers.

"Nina, without missing a beat, starts quoting from their quarterly earnings release. 'Best quarter in three years, huge prospects for growth,' and so on. Totally shuts that argument down," Levy says. "There are a lot of smart plaintiff employment lawyers out there, but it's seeing the issue coming beforehand and preparing to handle it that can distinguish good lawyering from great lawyering."

When Pirrotti needed a change after five years as an ADA, she looked toward Levy, who was working as a civil rights/employee rights lawyer.

"That put together everything that is important to me in terms of fighting the good fight," she says. "I said, 'This is the way I have to go.'"

The Garrison firm, she determined, would make a great fit, and after a hiccup or two, that's where she wound up. When she first arrived, every partner generously shared experiences and answered questions. When she apologized to Robert Richardson for always knocking on his door, he replied, "I view this as an investment in your future."

"I used to have nightmares about not studying for exams or that a paper was due and I hadn't done the work," she says. "One of the few nightmares I have now is being told I can no longer be at the Garrison law firm, I can no longer do civil rights and I'm going to go back to being a prosecutor or, even worse, go back to being in a big firm and doing big firm litigation where it's just about money and not about people."

Pirrotti, Garrison says, "gets settlements in cases that I think are simply bad cases. There were times when I was monitoring her caseload for case reviews and I'd say, 'Why did you take this case? It looks like a bad case. You should get out of it as quickly as you can,'" he recalls. "Then a couple months later, she comes in and says, 'Well, I got the case settled.' I don't know how she does that."

Pirrotti seeks more than financial compensation. She wants to see institutions and people make long-term changes. She says: "I try to make sure my adversaries learn from history—at least from the time I'm through with them—so that the workers that are left benefit."

**SO WHO WAS THE CLIENT WHO** wrote Pirrotti the poem?

The complaint Pirrotti filed on her behalf calls her "Jane Doe," but she recently decided to share her name in an effort to help other survivors.

Stephanie Edwards was a campus police officer who was raped multiple times by another officer. When she reported this to her department, not only was there was no investigation, but she was punished for speaking up.

"The allegations are that, when she needed back-up, sometimes they wouldn't come. Her reports were hyper-scrutinized. She could do no right," Pirrotti says. "One time they held up a video of a traffic stop so the supervisor could point out the things she allegedly did wrong."

The department only took action when Edwards confided in the leader of the college's women's studies center, who in turn filed a complaint. Only then was the accused suspended—but with pay. Edwards remained on the job, one of only two women on a force of about 50, until the stress became so unbearable she took a medical leave.

At the time a single mother of three, Edwards says she felt defeated. She visited multiple attorneys who declined her case. Then she met Pirrotti.

"I'm not promising you anything, but I'm going to fight for you," Edwards remembers Pirrotti saying.

During the litigation, Pirrotti brought Edwards back to the campus to point out locations where incidents of sexual abuse or harassment had occurred—including the locker room where men would shout at their female counterparts on the other side of a partition. Attorneys for the school accompanied them on the walk through.

"The other attorneys were being rude. 'Does she really have to look in this room? Does she really need to go in there?'" Edwards recalls, "and Nina said, 'Yes. She does.' That was it. She cut people off. She had me under her wing and she wouldn't let anybody or anything come at me."

Pirrotti secured a \$1.75 million settlement for Edwards. The offending officer was fired. Attorney and client then met with the university president to discuss the best way to prevent what happened to Edwards from ever happening to anyone else.

"These environments are rarely born of one rogue actor. It doesn't go away if you get rid of one person. You pluck out that weed and the others are just going to be popping up all over the place," Pirrotti says. "That's why so many clients go to litigation. The goal is not just accountability for themselves but to change the environment that's been created, so the workers who are left behind are not subjected to that same hostile workplace."

There are days when Pirrotti steps out of her home office and Steven Varnum, her husband of 15 years, looks at her and says, "You need to decompress."

She does this by hiking, exploring, or doing anything outdoors. She reads recipes and cookbooks and jokes that she'd like to be a food critic in another life. Her greatest joys, she says, come from time spent with her husband and daughter, Carina, 11. Every night, she and Carina watch an episode of *I Love Lucy* and laugh. They've now seen every episode multiple times, and still they laugh.

When Carina was 4 years old, Pirrotti asked the preschooler if she knew what her mom's job was. "To keep me safe," she replied.

Many of Pirrotti's clients, including Edwards, would say the same. "She protected me," says Edwards, who in July was named one of three Courageous Plaintiffs of the Year by National Employment Lawyers Association. "She will be in my life forever." 