

# ALBANY BUSINESS REVIEW

## Making the most of her reputation

SHENKER'S NEW VENTURE TAKING OFF AFTER SHE LEFT TOP LOBBYING FIRM

**C**ynthia "Cindy" Shenker has lived and worked in Albany most of her adult life. She started as an intern in the New York State Assembly, attended night classes to get her law degree, was legal counsel to three Assembly majority leaders and then left to become a partner at Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Dicker LLP, the biggest lobbying firm in the state. Now, she has started on a third chapter in her career that spans forty sessions – as one of the founding partners at Shenker, Russo & Clark, a new Albany government affairs firm that has grown rapidly in its first four months.

**Why did you decide to go into law?** Because I watched "Perry Mason" (a long-running TV drama about a defense lawyer). One day when I was five or six, I asked my mother why she named me Cynthia but called me Cindy. And she said, 'Well, someday if you're a professional then we thought you needed a more sophisticated name.' I said, 'What's a professional?' And she said, 'Like a doctor or a lawyer.' I really did watch "Perry Mason" all the time and that's what I wanted to be. I like solving people's problems.

**How did your experience starting out in government influence you?** I will talk to anyone in the world who calls me and wants to talk about getting a job, any kind of job – especially if it's in government. I got my start because, as I was handing out my resume, a complete and total stranger said, 'Go see so and so, tell them I sent you.' So I talk to everyone now.

**What was your biggest accomplishment when you worked in the Assembly?** I think a lot about what kind of training I got in the Legislature and what I realized is that we're not decision-makers. The more senior you were in staff, the less of a decision-maker you were. The elected officials really make the decisions. I'm not saying we didn't fight for our positions to be the one that was taken. Maybe the biggest accomplishment was how I learned to grow and to realize what your role is and how you can make a contribution. I learned there's a real value in working in public service. I'm very concerned with what's going on right now, that people think that being in public service is a bad thing.

**What's the most important thing in being a lobbyist?** You're only as good as your reputation. When I first started thinking about leaving and I was being interviewed, somebody said to me, 'Well, you're a Democrat, what happens if Pataki wins?' This is why I don't do politics. I said, 'First of all, that's not going to happen.' And then I said the professional answer is, 'Hire me because of who I am and the skills and talents that I have, not because of



**On corruption in Albany:**  
"If I thought that this was a corrupt den or an awful place ... I wouldn't want to be a part of it."

who I know now because that will change.' This is a career, this isn't just a way to make money.

**What do you do outside of work?** There's an outside of work? Just spending time with family. When you have children, they take over your life. This is a period of time now where they're out of school, they're working and they're happy. And at some point 10 years from now, or five if I'm lucky, I'll be a grandmother.

**Do you think Albany has a problem with corruption?** The honest answer is no. I really don't. Corrupt to me is someone who is amoral, someone who just only cares about themselves. Are there things that happen here that are illegal? That's for a court to decide. If I thought that this was a corrupt den or an awful place, I wouldn't be doing it. I wouldn't want to be a part of it.

**What do lobbyists think of the perception of the state government?** Remember, I'm a lawyer whose practice area is government affairs. As I learned from the Wilson Elser managing partner, they wouldn't be clients if they didn't have problems. Law is a gray area; it's not black and white. It's really the art of negotiation and argument.

**Any surprises as you've embarked on starting this new firm?** Just how supportive and helpful

## CYNTHIA "CINDY" SHENKER

**Title:** Founding partner at Shenker, Russo & Clark LLP; former partner at Albany's biggest lobbying firm, Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Dicker

**Age:** 60

**Resides:** Loudonville

**Grew up:** Rockland County, New York

**Education:** Bachelor's of science from Cornell University, law degree from Western New England University School of Law

**Family:** Jim Campbell, husband, and daughters, Alexandra, 27, and Madeline, 24.

**On the resume:** Worked as assistant counsel for Assembly Majority Leader Dan Walsh and counsel for two Assembly Majority Leaders, Jim Tallon and Michael Bragman

people have been. I don't want say I'm surprised, because I really like everybody. Maybe it's honored. I loved being at Wilson Elser, I was on the executive committee of an international firm, and now I'm doing something else. Now I'm focusing on just government affairs with a lot of fun people who are family.

**Why did you decide to start your own firm?** It just seemed like the right thing for the clients, the right thing for myself and the right thing for a lot of the people I was working with. It came together at a time where it just seemed like the right mix and we had a really good chance of being a success.

**Tell me about the pro bono clients Shenker Russo & Clark takes on. How do those come about?** It's really just someone has a problem and they don't have any money, or it doesn't seem right to take their money. Sometimes when I see a problem that government can solve and it's in my personal life, I don't think I'm going to charge friends, family, causes that I believe in. I represented Shaker Crew, because crew is not a recognized sport so they don't get funding from the school and they have to fundraise. I also represent the Center for Disability Services at the state level because I went to see what a friend was doing there, back when I first started lobbying, and seeing what they do for people – you just feel so lucky.

–Marie J. French, @AlbBizMarie