

The stellar divorce lawyer

BY TAMARA AUDI
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Jennifer Nasser's case is his latest auto-executive family situation

When metro Detroit charity-circuit socialite Jennifer Nasser filed for a divorce last month from Ford chief executive officer Jacques Nasser, friends were stunned at her move.

But not with her choice in lawyers. Jennifer Nasser, who is reportedly trying to reconcile with her husband although the divorce is proceeding in Oakland County Circuit Court, upheld a tradition of auto executives' wives when she turned to a former Notre Dame football player with a graying mustache and penchant for pinstripe suits.

If not for the legacy of satisfied women before Nasser — including both of former Chrysler Corp. Chairman Lee Iacocca's exes — John Schaefer might have seemed an odd pick for a wife about to do battle with a husband nicknamed the Knife for his hardball business tactics.

At 6 feet 3 and 235 pounds, Schaefer is a big man, but so mild-tempered that his two grown daughters call him Papa Bear. Opposing attorneys are known to gush over his gentlemanly ways and describe him as un confrontational. Clients from Palm Beach to Birmingham, where his practice is located, praise him with words such as "savior."

Aside from Nasser and the Iacocca women, he has represented the rich and infamous: Carolyn Ross, ex-wife of Ford Vice Chairman Louis Ross; Walter Buhl Ford III, ex-husband of Barb Ford, and Katina Dart, ex-wife of foam cup manufacturing billionaire Robert Dart.

And like those clients, for whom he has reportedly won millions, Schaefer's profitable practice has landed him among the metro area's wealthy elite. His family has a dozen club memberships, three homes and a jet-set lifestyle similar to the ones Schaefer dismantles into "his" and "hers" piles of money, top-breed pets and property titles.

But unlike legal superstar Geoffrey Fieger, 57-year-old Schaefer is a relative unknown among the general public. Though he has made a few radio and television appearances in his 31-year career, Schaefer has strived to try to keep his and his clients' names out of the public arena.

In an attempt to hush local radio talk show host Paul W. Smith's divorce, he filed it under P. William Smith. He successfully argued to seal the divorce complaint of former Chrysler Vice Chairman Robert Lutz, a rare coup

fond of saying. "I've seen powerful people in the absolute depths of despair. There are stories, but they can't be told. At least I won't tell them." Even if Schaefer is reluctant to talk, his lifestyle, and stories about his practice, speak volumes. Lee Iacocca's third wife, Darrien, fired her first lawyer, rejected a \$4-million settlement offer from her husband and hired Schaefer, believing she could do better. Though the final settlement was sealed after months of public wrangling, Schaefer said he and his client were delighted with the outcome.

His colleagues and adversaries estimate that Schaefer has been able to reach settlements agreeable to his clients in 95 percent of the 1,000 divorce cases he has handled. Of those, only a fraction have made it to court. From the leather lounge chairs of the Bloomfield Hills Country Club to the ladies room at the Detroit Opera House, Schaefer's name is synonymous with emerging, dignity intact, on the winning side of the modern megadivorce.

"There's a family joke that if my wife and I ever separate, the first custody fight would be over who gets John Schaefer," said Channel 7 news anchorman Guy Gordon, who hired Schaefer to represent him in contract negotiations. "He's nonconfrontational, and a 100-percent gentleman."

Yet beyond his nice-guy persona, there's no doubting Schaefer does what he must to deliver for his clients. In a lawsuit Schaefer refuses to discuss, former client Gloria Kogan accused him of unethical practices. Schaefer hired a private detective to set up her ex-husband, Oakland Mall mogul Jay Kogan, with a woman posing as a "high-class hooker," according to court documents.

Schaefer's legal secretary quit over Schaefer's handling of the case, "due to my convictions relative to his lack of ethics," she said in a resignation note attached to court files.

The suit also accuses Schaefer of overcharging — a criticism long associated with Schaefer's \$400-per hour fees and \$15,000 to \$50,000 retainer. The 1994 suit was settled out of court, the details undisclosed.

The right image

For the most part, however, Schaefer's life and practice have been without such controversy. His divorce

child was settled quietly. Nine months later, he married his wife, Sharon Schaefer, then a young widow with two daughters. The two have been married for 25 years, had one son together and have raised all four of their children, now ages 20 to 27. On their sofa is a pillow that reads "Happiness is being married to your best friend."

His wife says she and her husband don't discuss his cases, but the couple's presence at social functions is part of what makes the practice so successful, his peers say.

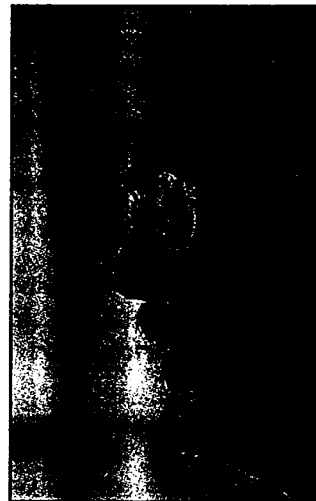
"John Schaefer has an image, an aura about him," said Hanley Gurwin, who opposed Schaefer in the Dart case. "He carries himself stately. He dresses very conservatively and very smartly. He belongs to the country clubs. He grew up in the right family environment. He understands his clients."

Schaefer's father owned a string of successful auto dealerships in Oakland County. He grew up in Bloomfield Hills and attended Cranbrook then Notre Dame, before deciding to study law at Michigan State University's Detroit College of Law. He is a member of 10 golf and country clubs, two yacht clubs and one shooting club.

Sitting in the plush study of the 6,000-square-foot Bloomfield Village colonial Schaefer refers to as his "B" house, or second-favorite home — the "A" house is a sprawling Dutch-Caribbean style Florida home; the "C" house is a summer escape in Harbor Springs — it is clear that to his super-rich clients and adversaries, Schaefer is an insider.

"Any woman I know would choose John. We know him and his family," said Grosse Pointe socialite Stephanie Germack, widow of pistachio nut mogul Frank Germack III. "John is the most sympathetic and sincere man. He makes you feel stronger than you are."

Schaefer and his wife, a fit blond whom her youngest son, Charlie, says is the "tough one," take weekend trips to Chicago in a private eight-person jet to visit their daughters. The couple have made their way around the world's best golf courses: Ireland, Scotland, Hawaii, California. They spend about 10 days a month at the "A" house in Hobe Sound, Fla. — an exclusive golfing and beach community north of Palm Beach.



GABRIEL B. TAIT/Detroit Free Press

John Schaefer: "I've seen powerful people in the absolute depths of despair. There are stories, but they can't be told. At least I won't tell them."

Schaefer represents plenty of men, he seems to more often attract as clients women who are used to being cared for, said Harriet Rotter, a family law attorney in Franklin.

"There's a whole niche of women out there who are needier, who have no idea how much money is in the checking account, who are dependent," Rotter said. "John's approach is, 'Don't worry, give me all your problems.'"

That approach worked with Jennifer Nasser, who said in her divorce complaint she did not know what her husband owned or his financial worth. If the Nasser divorce goes forward, it could prove to be one of Schaefer's messier cases, with public personas involved and millions at stake.

The Nasser divorce could be one of Schaefer's most profitable: Schaefer caps his fees at 10 percent of a client's settlement amount to avoid "runaway billing," but he has charged some clients more than \$1 million where large sums and complicated issues were involved, he said. Schaefer's firm handled 30 divorce cases in 1998, and 40 last year.

In 1999, Jacques Nasser made more than \$13.85 million in salary, bonuses, exercised stock options and other compensation. His take was 6.5 percent higher than in 1998, when he was executive vice president and made \$13 million.

Last week, those earnings were made public. The quiet man set to work.

TAMARA AUDI can be reached at 248-586-2622.