



The Law of Transformation

Family law attorney Melissa Averett guides clients as they evolve from victim to survivor and eventually grow into the author of their own story.

Melissa Averett is not defined by her past, and neither are her clients. “I’m an incest survivor, a rape survivor, and a battered woman survivor,” says Averett, managing attorney of Chapel Hill-based Averett Family Law. “I’m not proud of this, but neither am I ashamed because these weren’t my choices. These things do not define me. They’re a chapter of my history, not my whole story.”

Whether a client is a soldier with PTSD, a survivor of domestic violence, or a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, their control was taken away, leaving them vulnerable and overwhelmed. Averett understands these feelings personally and helps clients regain control by gently involving them in every step of their case.

“I can’t control the judge or opposing counsel, but I can set clear expectations for my clients,” Averett explains. “I want them to visit the courthouse before the trial so they don’t have anxiety trying to find it. I encourage them to watch me try a similar case in court to help them see the players and process so they know what to expect when it’s their turn.”

“I can relate to the survivors,” she continues. “They know I understand what they’ve been through and can see my career as a possibility for their future. I’ve survived my trauma and use it to give clients a voice to tell their stories to the court and move forward to rebuild their lives. I don’t see them as weird, broken, or frustrating—I see them healing.”

“I love it when my clients argue with me because that means they feel empowered to take me on. It lets me know they’re healing and that their current story is starting to become their history.”

—MELISSA AVERETT,
MANAGING ATTORNEY

TRAUMA-INFORMED LEGAL REPRESENTATION

More than an attorney, Averett is an international speaker specializing in trauma-informed legal representation. She has participated in legal conferences in Malta, Vietnam, Ireland, Australia, and Scotland to help lawyers understand the complexities and strategies for representing trauma survivors. She is scheduled to speak at a conference in Croatia next year.

“Long-term trauma physically alters how the brain works,” says Averett. “Survivors of trauma often can’t remember things the way others do. Pathways and neurons in the brain fuse incidents together, depending on how they react to fight-or-flight, messing with how they interpret memories, and may cause them to mix up events in court.”

When lawyers understand why a client reacts the way they do to trauma, it’s easier for them to respond with clear expectations to alleviate anxiety and achieve better results in court.

Averett understands that if clients laugh or can’t remember details, they aren’t diminishing the severity of the incident. Instead, they’re utilizing a coping mechanism to dissociate from pain by making light of a difficult topic. The reaction is a predictable behavior that can be managed and grounded if attorneys know how to respond.

“I help root clients in memories by asking questions to give them a time frame,” Averett says. “What was the weather like? Was there a holiday coming up? For example, it wouldn’t have been during the summer if they wore a heavy sweater during the incident. It helps them keep dates straight.”

THE STORY AFTER HISTORY

When Averett’s circumstances were at their worst, she found support in her paternal grandmother, who believed in her and envisioned a life beyond the brokenness she was experiencing. As an attorney, Averett now acts as that support for clients, reminding survivors trapped in trauma that they aren’t defined by the labels they give themselves. Their past may be a part of who they are, but it isn’t everything they are.

“I see people come in with shoulders tight and heads down. And that’s fine—it’s where



they are now. But over the course of their case, I’ll notice them in meetings as they begin to relax their shoulders and wear a smile that reaches their eyes as they move forward to rebuild their lives,” says Averett.

Some attorneys get flustered when a client argues with them, but Averett welcomes those moments with enthusiasm.

“I love it when my clients argue with me because that means they feel empowered to take me on. It lets me know they’re healing and that their story is starting to become their history,” she says.

The opportunity to see a client’s story change keeps Averett at her best. She recalls a client who was a domestic violence survivor involved in the same niche community and living in the same city as her abuser. When they kept running into each other, Averett encouraged her client to move to where she most wanted to be.

Ten years later, the client spotted Averett at an airport; they reconnected over drinks, and Averett learned that her former client credits Averett with the new direction her life has taken.

“It gives me chills to have a front-row seat to someone’s transformation,” says Averett. “I live to help others envision themselves in a different place, in a different time, living a different life; that life can be different than it is today.”

THE WORLD OF FAMILY LAW

As a family law attorney serving the university town of Chapel Hill and its surrounding areas, Averett faces a world of complex cases from international students, immigrants, and expats falling in and out of love.

“Say a student from Spain marries someone from India,” Averett explains. “Their parents

want to make sure their inheritance is protected with prenuptial agreements, but these agreements need to work in the couple’s home countries as well as the United States. If they divorce, the property settlement, custody, child support, and alimony need to be enforceable in all three countries.”

As an international speaker and advocate, Averett is connected to family law attorneys worldwide and provides well-traveled counsel and compassionate advocacy to cases often involving one or more attorneys from each country represented. It isn’t easy work, but the cases are multidimensional puzzles she’s eager to resolve to bring a just outcome to her clients.



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