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## Meister Law taking on the big guns

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**'A different set of rules applies to victims of crimes at sea'**

By **DONNA BALANCIA**, CFLJ Editor

MIAMI — It's not easy to stage a battle in international waters. But that's what maritime attorney Tonya Meister faces every day at Meister Law LLC of Miami.

At best, Meister's job is rewarding. She fights for the rights of wronged crewmembers, advocates for victims of crimes on the high seas, and helps make stormy waters still.

At worst, Meister is bucking the stacked cards of the corporations, which have centuries-old maritime laws and legal loopholes on their side. Many of Meister's clients are poorly paid, foreign crewmembers from countries with names that are difficult to pronounce.

But sometimes her clients are Americans who just want a nice vacation.

Take the case of widow Anita Scarborough of Merritt Island.

The statuesque 70-something with a big family and a zest for life had been anticipating a fun vacation aboard a Bahamas-bound cruise ship.

What she got instead was barely a scant memory of stepping aboard the ship, a \$23,000 bill on her credit card and a three-month stay — in a coma — in the hospital.

In papers filed in Florida's 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court, Meister claims her client was damaged by the negligent actions of Royal Caribbean, which didn't provide the proper medical care for her client, whose enlarged heart condition was misdiagnosed — and worsened — when she fell ill aboard ship.

Royal Caribbean issued a statement: "Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd. wishes to respect the medical privacy of Mrs. Scarborough and therefore prefers not comment on the details of her case in a public forum. However, we look forward to responding to the unsupported allegations made against our company in a court of law."

Meister said Royal Caribbean responded to her that ship doctors are not directly employed by the company.

"But these employees wear the ship's uniform, they eat with the ship's crew, they're under the command of ship's officers, they're paid a salary by Royal Caribbean and they work in ship's hospital," Meister said. "They're called a ship's officer, but the cruise line is trying to say it's not responsible for these people."

Scarborough was previously diagnosed with Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy, or, enlarged heart. According to court documents, while aboard Mariner of the Seas, Scarborough reported to the clinic because she had not been feeling well. She claims ship's doctors did not diagnose her properly and her condition worsened because she was diagnosed with heart attack. Keeping her aboard ship until the end of the cruise worsened her condition, putting her in a coma, and has caused subsequent and permanent conditions, the suit alleges.

"When her condition deteriorated they should have sent her ashore to the hospital, where she could have been treated by a cardiologist," Meister said. "When you have a patient in critical, you don't keep them on board, she had travel insurance and there are islands with hospitals. There were options."

During her career, Meister has seen a lot happen on foreign-flagged cruise ships.

But she asks: "When you get on a ship in a

U.S. port, don't you have a reasonable expectation that you're going to get a competent doctor?"

Scarborough is seeking compensatory damages for pain and suffering, loss of enjoyment of life.

Meister said Scarborough's case is an example of why she went into maritime law.

"This is the type of case where my work is so important, we need to hold the cruise lines responsible," Meister said. "These things happen over and over and over again. This isn't the only situation like this."

Meister represents passengers with cruise-related damages as well as crewmembers in a range of cases.

**Meister Law LLC is located at Courthouse Tower, Suite 750, 44 West Flagler Street Miami. 33134. The phone is 305-590-5570, Web site is [www.meisterlawfirm.com](http://www.meisterlawfirm.com)**

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