

## **AN INTERVIEW WITH DOUGLAS DONNELLY**

### **By Robin Fleischner**

Doug Donnelly is a big man with a big heart. When I sat down to interview him, his passion for his faith, his family, and adoption law burst from him, and he spoke with tears in his eyes.

He explained that being emotional is in his DNA: "I am from a big Irish family and all too often tears are just beneath the surface."

Doug started college at age 17 and decided to become an attorney while he was still an undergraduate. Attending law school immediately after college, he graduated and passed the California Bar Exam at age 24. Visiting Santa Barbara, he was smitten and just knew that he wanted to practice law there.

By training Doug was a real estate lawyer and he feels that this training really helped in his transition to adoption because in real estate law, full disclosure is key and he brought the same approach to adoption. Doug stumbled into adoption law when his wife underwent a hysterectomy, they looked into adopting a child, and no one in the Santa Barbara area practiced adoption law.

A Los Angeles adoption attorney, David Leavitt, generously mentored Doug, encouraging him to handle his own first adoption, advising: "You are a lawyer and I know you can do this. Call me with any questions."

Doug and his wife adopted two daughters, who are now 33 and 35 years old. To his surprise, he realized that he had become an adoption lawyer when he compiled his regular Monday list of work for the coming week and noticed that it was all adoption work. He believes that he is right in the center of doing what he was meant to do.

Matching adoptive parents and birth parents is Doug's favorite aspect of his law practice. Although he enjoys uncontested adoptions most, he handles many contested adoptions and does a great deal of trial work. Handling contested adoptions all over California, he noted that in the week before we sat down for the interview, he appeared in six different courthouses in five days. A trial that goes well is very rewarding because he feels he has made a positive difference in people's lives.

Doug considers the greatest accomplishment in his legal career to be making law in California, along with Janis Stocks, about the issue of what a birth father must do to have veto power over an adoption. In *Adoption of Michael H*, 10 Cal. 4th 1043 (1995), the California Supreme Court accepted Doug's argument in a contested adoption, ruling that an unwed birth father must act responsibly both before and immediately after a baby is born in order to earn the legal right to withhold his consent to an adoption. At the time of the Supreme Court decision, the child was already four years old and had been in the adoptive home from birth. As a result of the seminal ruling, hundreds (perhaps thousands) of children have been adopted in California.

From the path he has travelled, Doug has learned that his life is not about him: "My Christian faith is central to my life. I make no apology for it."

With great emotion, Doug confides that in 2002, he was diagnosed with kidney cancer, a disease with only a 42 percent survival rate past three years.

"When I received my diagnosis, the hardest thing I had to do was tell my youngest daughter that I probably wouldn't live long enough to walk her down the aisle. However, I was fortunate that they caught the cancer early, and although I lost one kidney, I am now considered cured."

Doug's greatest personal accomplishments are being married to his wife for over 40 years and having two terrific kids and a wife he adores. His most cherished memories are walking both of his daughters down the aisle at their weddings. Following our conversation, he and his wife were flying to Phoenix to pick up their two-year-old granddaughter to take care of her while their daughter enjoyed her second honeymoon.