



Member Spotlight



GETTING TO KNOW ELLEN COOKMAN, JD, LL.M

What drew you to the practice of special needs planning?

In 2008 I had burned out of doing patent and securities litigation at a big firm (ugh!) and wanted to transition to a kinder, gentler practice. I ended up attending a parent support group meeting where an attorney was discussing special needs trusts, and discovered an area where you get to actually help families, find out who they love and what they own, while earning a living and raising your own family! I was hooked!

Also, various special needs run in my family—I have family members who have struggled with depression, and who are on the Autism spectrum, including my older son. So I feel very comfortable with and drawn to the population.

What advice would you give a young person who aspires to practice special needs law?

First, I would encourage them to pursue this field—we definitely need more committed attorneys in this area, and it can be very rewarding! I'd recommend starting by working for several years under a seasoned attorney who specializes in this field; there's a steep learning curve, plus a lot of liability if you get something wrong.

Who or what inspires you the most?

At our firm we encounter many parents whose children have really challenging lives; it can be heartbreaking. But I am inspired by how these parents (especially the moms) often find a way to apply their pain toward helping other families in similar situations. For example, some parents create amazing housing options for those with disabilities, start private schools that serve overlooked populations, or create/contribute to nonprofits that raise money and perform research in specific areas of disability. I find this remarkable.

What are you most proud of accomplishing in your career or personal life?

Starting my own firm. My family is pretty risk-averse, and though there are lots of lawyers in my family, they have all worked as an employee of a firm/government/university. It was a big risk to step out there and hang my own shingle...but now, 10 years later, it's borne fruit: we've grown to 15 team members (including 3 attorneys and 3 paralegals), and we serve clients all over California! I think that's pretty cool.

What's your ideal way to spend a Saturday?

I like going out to tea with friends or reading at home and recovering from the week! And our family also enjoys doing Escape Rooms.