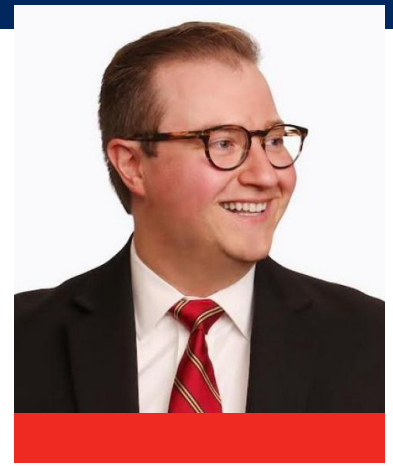


New Jersey attorney displays special passion for elder law



By Brian Cox

In another life, attorney Donny Dennison may have been able to find work on stage as a professional hypnotist.

With his calm voice and relaxed body language, Dennison offers his elder law clients a steady, understanding presence when they are most in need of reassurance. It is an approach he has worked to refine over the years as he builds his practice at Mandelbaum Barrett PC in New Jersey.



Young Donny Dennison with his grandfather proudly displaying their catch. Fishing was an activity that bonded Dennison with his grandfather and his father.

“Working in this field, every single day I speak with people who oftentimes are faced with very difficult life circumstances,” Dennison says. “In such an emotionally charged practice area, it helps to have a sense of calm when you’re talking with people. To not only reassure them that they have options, but to guide the conversation in an effective manner.”

His clients may be seeking help managing their affairs through a terminal diagnosis or the death of a close loved one. Some find themselves confronting the terrifying possibility of sacrificing their life savings as they encounter the exorbitant costs of long-term care.

“There are a lot of sad stories that come through my telephone line or walk through our door,” says Dennison. “What I like about my practice is that I’m able to help people and their families navigate the waters of paying for long-term care by utilizing government benefits that they’ve paid into while preserving some of their hard-earned savings. It provides a lot of hope to people.”

Dennison was introduced to elder law while attending Touro University Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center in Long Island, N.Y., after working for the Senior Citizens Law Program his third year. While Dennison had initially sought work in a clinic dealing with youth advocacy, the school didn’t offer one. Instead, Dennison recognized a similarity between the vulnerabilities of juveniles and many older adults, especially those who may have dementia or suffer from a physical impairment and are susceptible to influence and being taken advantage of by unscrupulous people. The clinic’s senior attorney, Denise Marzano-Doty, proved to be an influential mentor and role model, with whom Dennison became close and remains in contact.

“I fell in love with elder law,” says Dennison. “So much so, that after just two months of working in the clinic I had committed myself to the idea of applying for a post-graduate job at a boutique elder law firm.”

After earning his J.D., Dennison returned to New Jersey and joined Fink Rosner Ershow-Levenberg Mariano, LLC, a small firm that focuses exclusively on elder law. There, Dennison gained experience implementing complex asset preservation; exempt transfers; gift-annuity plans; as well as researching and preparing

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pleadings and memoranda of law for guardianships; protective arrangements; will reformations; undue influence claims; and elective share claims.

In June of 2021, Dennison accepted an associate position in the elder law department at Mandelbaum Barrett where he concentrates his practice on guardianships, Medicaid planning, probate litigation, and special needs and estate administration.

“I went from a small firm that only took on elder law matters to a firm that pretty much handles any sort of legal issue,” says Dennison. “I found it to be helpful to be surrounded by people who have a variety of concentrations because when it comes to elder law there are so many other areas of the law that can sometimes find their way into a case. It’s nice to have access to someone right down the hall who specializes in an area that I’m not as familiar with.”

One growing area of Dennison’s practice arises from his extensive experience with helping members of the LGBTQ+ community address legal issues surrounding aging and disabilities.

“As a member of the LGBTQ community myself, I think I’m uniquely positioned to assist people who are facing age-related or disability-related issues,” says Dennison. “I can help them navigate not only those issues, but identify specific resources that cater to them.”

Dennison serves on the New Jersey State Bar’s Elder and Disability Law Section Executive Committee, where he is currently secretary. For several years he served as a panelist at the annual New Jersey Elder Law Retreat, and in 2021 and 2022, he delivered the retreat’s Elder and Disability Case Law Update.

Elder law is Dennison’s second love, however.

“The last thing I wanted to do when I was in high school and even most of college was get dressed up every day and sit behind a desk, which is exactly what I’m doing,” he jokes before revealing that his first ambition was to be a farmer.

As a kid growing up in a suburb of Union County, N.J., Dennison says he doesn’t recall a single friend ever sharing his passion for farming. As a city boy, he’s not sure where his interest in agribusiness came from.

“I’ve just always liked the idea of working in the soil and being able to be self-sustainable,” he says. “To this day, if there is an issue with my parents’ houseplants or garden, I’m the first person they call to not only diagnose the issue but also take care of whatever pest or mold is afflicting their plants.”

Even as he considered and toured various colleges with agribusiness programs, his father persuaded him to consider alternative career choices. To the question, “What would you want to do if you weren’t pursuing the dream of being a farmer?” Dennison expressed an interest in politics.

At King’s College in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Dennison majored in political science and government. He soon realized that the



Attorney Donny Dennison has enjoyed fishing since he was a child and recently has taken up fly fishing.

majority of his classmates earning a political science degree were bound for law school.

To gauge his own interest in a law career, Dennison secured an internship his senior year with Judge William Amesbury, who at the time was appointed by the Pennsylvania governor to fill a vacancy on the Court of Common Pleas in the wake of a scandal that garnered national attention. Two judges had been convicted of accepting money in return for imposing harsh sentences on juveniles to increase occupancy at a private prison. It became known as the “kids-for-cash” scheme.

“Judge Amesbury is the person who inspired me the most to go to law school,” says Dennison. “He had a very interesting perspective on restorative justice.”

Dennison says it was not uncommon for the judge to leave his office early to attend one of his prior defendant’s hockey or baseball games as a way of saying, “I care about you.”

“It was something he realized would be helpful in the aftermath of the scandal,” says Dennison. “It was very effective.”

The experience solidified Dennison’s plans to go to law school and sparked an interest in juvenile justice that ultimately led him into elder law.

Dennison and his two sisters grew up in a traditional Irish Catholic family. His mother worked in the pharmaceutical industry

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and his father owned a small technology-based business. He recalls the family gathering at a local Irish pub every Sunday after church for a meal and to enjoy live Irish music. When he was 12, he picked up the bodhran (a small drum that is often described as the heart of Irish music because it keeps the beat of most jigs or reels) and began playing with the musicians at the pub.

“It was fun. I’d get tips. I’d get the spotlight for an hour, which I always loved,” he says. “My dad and I bonded over our shared love for Irish music and fishing.”

Throughout his childhood, Dennison, his father and his grandfather often fished near Barnegat, N.J. He continues to make time to fish, going at least once a week. He has now taken a liking to fly-fishing for trout and sometimes travels into Pennsylvania, Vermont, or New Hampshire in search of “trophy stretches.”

“There is a real art to it. I view it as more of an art form than an outdoor hobby,” he says.

If fly-fishing is an outdoor art for Dennison, then cooking and painting are indoor ones. Though he finds painting to be relaxing, he doesn’t confess to being an accomplished artist. His cooking and baking, on the other hand, are a different matter.

“I find cooking and baking bread to be a creative outlet,” says Dennison, who is accustomed to creating a four-course meal on a Sunday. “And the people around me don’t complain because they reap the benefit.”

Appropriately enough, as an elder law attorney who encourages his clients to look to the future, Dennison has designed a plan for retirement.

“Ultimately, my plan, upon retiring, is to be a law professor,” he says. “I always looked up to my law professors who brought with them an abundance of first-hand, personal experience, and the ability to communicate effectively with their students what real life practice is like.”

It’s an ambition that Dennison formed over the last several years as he has interacted with and fielded questions from summer associates and interns at Mandelbaum Barrett.



A dog lover, attorney Donny Dennison spends time with his “fur nephew” Izzy, who is the pet of his colleague Xena Balcazar at Mandelbaum Barrett.

“I’ve thoroughly enjoyed sitting down with many of them and going through certain legal topics that they would not encounter if they were just doing their normal internship or clerking work,” he says. “I enjoy having those loftier, intellectual and theoretical conversations.”