

KATY McDONALD KRAFT

Impacting Families
in her Hometown

by Bethany Krajelis

BLOOMINGTON—As a family law attorney, Kathleen McDonald Kraft sees the full spectrum of emotions.

On one end, she gets a glimpse into the lives of clients who are facing the death of a marriage or the possibility of losing custody of their children. And on the other end, Kraft gets a front row seat to the joy that comes along with adoptions.

“Adoption work is so rewarding,” says Kraft, a partner at **Thomson & Weibtraub** in

couple adopted a daughter. Both of their children, who are now 11 and 8 respectively, are from Russia.

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“It gave me a sense of empathy of what it’s like to be on the receiving end of a court system and waiting for our turn, if you will,” she says. “It’s just a different perspective. I think everyone needs to have an opportunity to gain that empathy.”

Hometown Lawyer

A large portion of Kraft’s practice comes from referrals. With Bloomington a relatively small community, Kraft says some of her



Bloomington. “You are helping a family get created or expand.”

Although adoptions do not make up a large part of her practice, she says it is her favorite aspect of the family law arena for several reasons, most of which can be boiled down to two simple words: “It’s happy.”

The joy that comes along with adoptions is a feeling that Kraft is familiar with on a personal level. In 2001, Kraft and her husband, Walt, adopted their son. Two years later, the

couple adopted a daughter. Both of their children, who are now 11 and 8 respectively, are from Russia. While she represented clients in adoption proceedings before she adopted her own children, going through the process from the other side of the table gave Kraft a new perspective.

The adoption process took about year each time, with “loads and loads” of accompanying paperwork and several trips to Russia to make sure she and her husband satisfied requirements from the Russian government, the United States government, the state of Illinois, and their adoption agency. It is an experience that not only helped Kraft and her husband create their own family, but one that she believes has made her a better lawyer. She understands what her clients are going through and can relate to them through shared stories about the trial and tribulations of being adoptive parents.

clients have sought her help in adoption matters because they know she has gone through it herself.

“I find there’s a lot of general knowledge in the community that, ‘Oh, you know, she’s a lawyer, she has adopted, call her,’” Kraft says.

While Bloomington may have a larger population than Mayberry, the fictional community in *The Andy Griffith Show*, Kraft jokes that it feels that small at times.

Kraft, 45, grew up in Bloomington with five

siblings. They all went to a Catholic school, which means Kraft not only knew all of her classmates, but knew all of her siblings' classmates, not to mention the fact that her dad still runs a dental practice in town.

"To practice in your hometown is a mixed bag," she says.

Needless to say, it is not that uncommon for Kraft to run into someone she knows from her past in her law practice. She has represented the spouse of a man who was in the class ahead of her in high school. To her surprise, she ran into a few former clients when she visited her son's school when he was in kindergarten. She makes a conscious effort not to take cases that are close to her children.

Although Kraft did not grow up with any lawyers in her family, she knew from a pretty young age that she wanted to join the legal profession. When she was in the fifth grade, Kraft was debating between being a doctor or a lawyer. By the time she took advanced biology and chemistry in high school, she knew the law was for her.

Kraft graduated from the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign in 1988 with a degree in political science. She went straight into the U of I's College of Law and graduated cum laude three years later.

While she may have known she wanted to be a lawyer early on in life, Kraft was not exactly sure what kind of lawyer she wanted to be. So during law school, she took a pair of internships to get a taste of what was out there.

She clerked in State Farm's law department and at Costigan & Wollrab, P.C., a Bloomington law firm that ranged in focus from estate work to complex business and commercial litigation. When she graduated cum laude from law school in 1991, Kraft, however, was still undecided on what kind of law she wanted to practice.

She ended up taking a job in the Rockford office of the law firm of Hinshaw & Culbertson LLP. Kraft handled collections; a practice area that she says gave her "brilliant litigation experience immediately." She was in the courtroom the day after she was sworn in as a member of the state's bar, something that many of her law school classmates had to wait months to do.

'Hardworking, Vivacious, Dedicated'

While she learned a lot at Hinshaw & Culbertson, Kraft knew the firm was not a long-term fit for her. She left the following year to join Thomson & Weintraub, a general practice firm that handles everything from criminal defense and estate planning to family law and personal injury.

"Literally, Alan Weintraub, who is my senior partner, ran into my mom on the street in Bloomington, as things in Bloomington happen," she says. "He knew that I had gone to law school, asked where I was, what my status was, and if I was interested in coming home. Two weeks later, I had the job, and I've been here ever since."

Weintraub was impressed with Kraft's educational background and intelligence.

"She was hardworking, she was vivacious, she was dedicated," he says. "She showed tremendous aptitude for the practice of law."

And in the almost two decades the two have worked together, Kraft has more than proved herself as a leading lawyer, Weintraub says. He says Kraft has tremendous people skills, a knack for relating to her clients and the ability to organize her case without being abrasive to the court. To put it simply, Weintraub says, Kraft is "just a tremendous lawyer."

"About 10 years ago, I suggested she consider applying for Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers," he says. "At that point in time, there were one or two downstate lawyers who had achieved that honor."

"She really studied hard. She was skilled, and she was ultimately selected. She's still one of only a handful of lawyers from downstate Illinois. That's a feather in her cap."

Kraft practices alongside Weintraub, three other partners, one associate and a paralegal. The firm's cozy size, Kraft says, creates a team-atmosphere in which everyone supports and bounces ideas off each other.

She focuses her practice on family law, though she also does do some real estate, business law and general litigation work. She handles cases in McLean, Logan, Champaign, Dewitt, Livingston and Woodford counties, a practice area that provides her with the opportunity to practice in several courtrooms and work with lawyers throughout the state.

Being As Candid As Possible

When it comes to interacting with her clients, Kraft believes being candid is the best way to go.

"I think it is a critical part of my job to be as candid as possible," she says. "Client education is important."

She says she has made it a point to have direct contact with all of her clients, a practice that has helped her earn their trust and keep on top of their cases. Kraft prefers having sit-down meetings with her clients.

In fact, she discourages e-mail contact with clients, especially those in the midst of divorce proceedings, for several reasons. First, Kraft says, "No one can figure out an e-mail

password better than a spouse." She also has other worries over confidentiality and cost. She doesn't want her clients' bills to go up for unnecessary email exchanges.

"It's important to be cost effective," Kraft says.

Along with dealing with her clients directly, Kraft likes to be the one organizing and controlling their cases files.

"So much can be lost by not being the one to go through their file and doing all the work," she says. "I don't want to miss anything."

As a former client, Sue Kirk is more than familiar with Kraft's hands-on approach.

The two women met back in 2002, when Kirk asked another attorney to refer her to a divorce lawyer. She was sent Kraft's way and couldn't have been happier to have Kraft represent her in what became a very difficult case. They became friends and continue to keep in touch, grabbing lunch every now and then to catch up.

Kirk says Kraft showed much compassion and sensitivity in handling her case. She appreciated Kraft's ability to defuse emotional situations and keep tabs on every aspect of her case. Kirk says Kraft is direct, practical and has a good sense of humor, the latter of which is something Kirk says is beneficial to clients who are experiencing the tough emotions that come along with divorce.

"I really liked her style," Kirk says. "I like to understand situations, all the possible options, what's the best thing to do, and Katy was very good about pointing out to me the pros and cons."

Along with making her clients happy, Kraft enjoys the challenges of the legal profession. Generally speaking, Kraft likes the challenge of working out financial matters in divorce cases. Handling multi-million dollar divorces can be satisfying, but Kraft says she gets just as much enjoyment out of working with clients who have substantial debt.

"The high debt load cases, frankly, are more challenging for a family to create two households, remedy the debt issue, and move forward in a productive fashion," she says.

While she facing challenges head-on, Kraft has respects the mediation process. This process, she says, can provide her clients resolutions in a way that is quicker and typically less expensive than going to trial.

"I love my mediation work. I think mediation is an amazing process which allows parents to remain in control of their family's destiny," Kraft says. "To be able to assist clients in reaching agreements and avoiding having a stranger make decisions about their family is about the most productive use of our time as lawyers, I believe." ■