

# Alice E. Dolan

## Delivering Justice for the Seriously Injured

by Dan Rafter



Alice E. Dolan has tackled plenty of important cases during her long career as one of the leading personal injury and medical malpractice attorneys in Chicago. But some stand out for the founder of **Alice E. Dolan & Associates LLC**.

There was the 18-year-old in Joliet, for instance. A piece of farm equipment malfunctioned, sending a spray of ammonia into the man's face and suddenly blinding him. Dolan represented the man in a jury trial, and won the case. As impressive as that was, what has stuck with Dolan are the events after the trial.

Dolan's client married his high school sweetheart and had a child. Because of his blindness, the client had never been able to see this child. But once Dolan won his case, the client used the money from the successful verdict for a corneal transplant. As a result, Dolan's client was able to see his child for the first time.

"He was able to see a child that he had never before seen," Dolan says. "That was a remarkable event. This was a very tragic

situation for this client. But because he was able to get justice in the courtroom, he was now able to see again, even if temporarily. This was an amazing result."

To Dolan, this case provides a perfect example of why personal injury law has been so satisfying: It gives her the chance to make a difference in the lives of her clients.

"I have always felt, and still do, that we are actually helping people in a very concrete, direct way," Dolan says. "It's particularly rewarding when you know that the folks who are permanently injured now have a financial means of continuing to receive medical care for their injuries long after the case is resolved."

### Providing the Important Answers

Dolan has enjoyed a long career in personal injury and medical malpractice. During it, she's tackled a wide variety of cases.

She obtained a jury verdict of \$8.6 million for the family of an 18-year-old girl who was killed when a Greyhound bus forced a car off the highway. The car struck

the young college student.

She also crafted a \$7.9 million settlement for a 52-year-old pipe insulator who had developed compartment syndrome — a particularly painful condition caused when the pressure within muscles builds up to dangerous levels — after a physician and hospital staff failed to recognize that a blood clot had formed after a total knee replacement.

Some cases have made an even bigger impact. In 2004, Dolan helped to secure a settlement of \$11 million for the widow of a 51-year-old man who was rendered a quadriplegic and eventually died after a device used to hold his head in place failed during cervical surgery at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. This result was recognized by *Crain's Chicago Business* as one of the top 20 settlements registered in Illinois that year.

Though each of these cases involved different circumstances and different families, all of Dolan's clients had one thing

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in common: They all sought answers. And Dolan, through her legal work, was able to find some for them.

“A lot of times, the families that come to me, particularly in medical malpractice cases and in the deaths of family members, can’t get answers for whatever reason,” Dolan says. “No one is talking to them or maybe they can’t understand the explanations they are receiving. They simply can’t get an answer. People are relieved when I can get them answers, even if I have to tell them that there isn’t a case there. In the cases that are successful, they feel that they finally have an answer as to why their loved one passed away. That is hard to put a dollar value on. That peace of mind is invaluable.”

Answers are important to Dolan because she cares for her clients. As she works to earn successful verdicts or settlements for them, it’s not unusual for Dolan to forge relationships with her clients. Many cases, after all, take years to resolve. Good attorneys will get to know their clients during these years.

“I have so much empathy for my clients,” Dolan says. “They might have suffered some injury or lost a family member. I am struck by the stories of each of them. I am very empathetic to what is happening to them. It is real life. It’s what happens to people. They get hurt. Someone does something wrong to them. It has an impact on almost every aspect of their lives. I like my clients, and I want to see them get the answers they need.”

John Pappas of the Chicago law firm of Pappas, Healy & Pappas has worked with many attorneys during his lengthy career. But few have impressed him as greatly as has Dolan.

“Alice has this ability to see potential problems long before other attorneys would,” Pappas says. “She can then take the steps to mitigate these problems. It’s part of the reason why she’s been so successful for her clients.”

Dolan shines in the courtroom, Pappas says, referring to her as one of the most skilled trial attorneys he’s met. But Dolan’s success doesn’t just come from her presence in the courtroom. She puts in the hard work and research, too, to give her clients every chance to win their cases.

“She is extremely dedicated to her clients,” Pappas says. “I’ve seen some of her cross-examinations, and they are very impressive. She is definitely a special attorney.”

Pappas isn’t alone in this praise. Mark Lura, a partner with Chicago’s Anderson, Rasor & Partners, remembers the deposition of an important treating physician. Lura spent an hour trying to

get concessions out of the director of the program. When he was done, he was hopeful that he could use the director at an upcoming trial. Dolan, though, made sure that wouldn’t happen.

“In about 10 questions, Alice destroyed all I had built up, and any hope of using him had vanished,” Lura says. “An hour later and Alice was in my home, cuddling with my newborn daughter. Ferocious adversary. Good friend.”

### Attracted to Law Early

As a youngster, Dolan admired an attorney who never seemed to lose, who gave his all to every client and was always the model of ethical behavior. That the attorney was fictional didn’t matter. Dolan was hooked on the greatest TV lawyer of all time, Perry Mason.

“I was fascinated by him,” Dolan says. “He always seemed to win. He put the puzzle pieces together with his assistant and investigator. And they always found the answer. I remained fascinated by that even after I stopped watching the show. When it was time for me to decide what to do after college, I knew I would regret it if I didn’t go to law school.”

Dolan adds, “Not surprisingly, I am a *Law and Order* fan. Although I wish our cases were resolved as quickly, it is about putting the pieces together.”

Dolan followed her instincts, a move that proved wise. While earning her law degree at the John Marshall Law School, Dolan, thanks to Illinois Supreme Court Rule 711, was able to earn a license to practice law before graduating, as long as she did so in a supervised setting with specific organizations.

Dolan began working with Chicago Legal Volunteer Services and took on her first trial in probate court as a 711 student with the organization. Dolan’s supervisor was present in the courtroom, but she gave Dolan free reign to handle the entire bench trial.

That trial ended on a positive note, with a verdict in favor of Dolan’s client. If Dolan didn’t know it earlier, she did now: Law, and litigation in particular, was the field for her.

Near the end of her days in law school, Dolan clerked for a solo practitioner, a plaintiff’s personal injury attorney. Again, Dolan was hooked. She’s remained a force in this field for more than three decades.

Dolan certainly has no regrets. The field is a rewarding one, she says, and she never tires of being able to help families move on from injuries or losses.

She points to one family as an example. Six children had lost their father, and a wife had lost her husband of 50 years after a physician punctured the man’s heart while

inserting a chest tube from behind to relieve fluid in the man’s lungs. The man died quickly, and the close-knit family wanted to know why this tragedy had happened. No one would admit to them why their father and husband had suddenly died.

Dolan found the answer: The tragedy was completely avoidable, and Dolan managed to find the family at least some financial relief.

“The family members weren’t bitter, and when it came time to distribute the money to the heirs, every one of the six children refused to take their share. They gave their money to their mother,” Dolan says. “It was never a question in their minds. To help this family get some answers was so rewarding.”

### All of the Right Skills

Mary Mulhern is no stranger to Dolan’s legal talents. Mulhern, a judge with the Cook County law division who retired in 2013, saw firsthand just how prepared and tenacious Dolan was for her clients. Mulhern points to one medical malpractice case in particular. Dolan was cross-examining one of the defendants on the first day of trial. And during it, the courtroom was oddly silent.

“You could have heard a pin drop in the courtroom,” Mulhern says. “It was that riveting of a performance. I get goose bumps just thinking about it. Alice was building this foundation. Just like on TV, the last question was the key one.”

And the answer that Dolan’s last question elicited? It was the opposite of what the defendant had testified to during discovery. It was also damning for a co-defendant in the case. To little surprise, the trial ended in a settlement — a positive one for Dolan’s client — on the following day.

“Alice didn’t look surprised when the defendant gave her answer, even though it was so shocking,” Mulhern says. “Alice took it in stride and sat down. But I do believe that Alice’s question and the answer it prompted caused that trial to go to settlement.”

That was a dramatic moment. But it stemmed from preparation, Mulhern says. “That is one of Alice’s hallmarks. She is also well-prepared for her cases,” he says. “Her knowledge and her preparation make her a formidable advocate for her clients.”

Why has personal injury law been such a good fit for Dolan? She points to one trait in particular: She is stubborn in her search for information that can help her clients win their cases. Dolan puts in the long hours to obtain key documents and records. She asks the right questions in her depositions until she gets the answers she needs.

“Often, my depositions are longer,” Dolan

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says. “But being tenacious is important. You have to stay on top of everything when preparing a case. It is so important to get the information that you need.”

Of course, no attorney practices for more than three decades without encountering challenges. There are always hurdles to overcome. For Dolan, one challenge is changing the perceptions people sometimes have about her clients. Too many people automatically think personal injury attorneys and their clients are merely ambulance chasers, both out to squeeze as many dollars as possible from every case. This, Dolan says, is far from the truth.

“Too many have the notion that people who are filing lawsuits for personal injuries are just trying to get money without having to work for it,” Dolan says.

“This negative attitude can come at any stage of a case, whether you’re talking to an insurance adjuster or trying to pick a jury. That can be difficult for me. The clients I deal with are not cashing in a lottery ticket, just trying to grab some money. They have legitimate and very serious injuries that have dramatic impacts on their lives. These injuries can impact the folks around them, their family members or co-workers. So they are not just out to make some easy money.”

Personal injury and medical malpractice law are passions for Dolan. But so are her outside interests. Besides enjoying horseback riding, Dolan sings in the Chicago Bar Association’s chorus and in a local church choir. She also sits on the board of Our Lady of Tepeyac High School, a girls’ Catholic secondary school in the heart of Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood.

Joni Thompson, president of Our Lady of Tepeyac High School, says Dolan continues to make a positive impact on the students there.

Thompson mentions the mentoring program that Dolan and other board members formed last year. Altogether they are mentoring six sophomores.

Dolan has never missed a career day at the school since joining its board eight years ago, Thompson says. And Dolan’s career-day sessions are packed, Thompson adds.

“Our young women who think they might want to become lawyers get a taste of what they are up against,” says Thompson. “Alice gives them the information they need about applying to the right colleges and what they need to do to prepare for a career in law. She is an amazing advocate for our school, and we greatly appreciate her efforts.” ■