

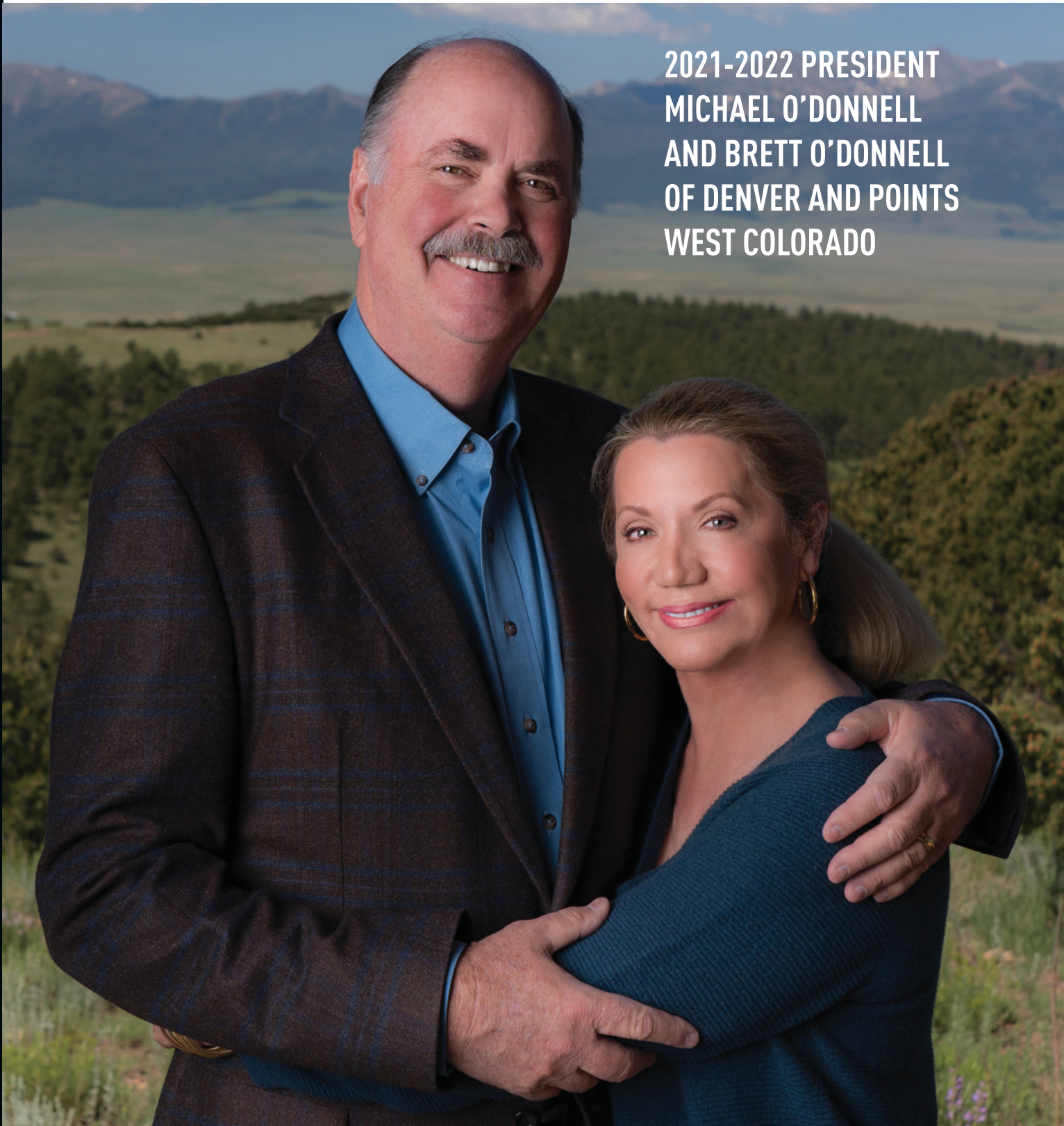


# JOURNAL

THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF TRIAL LAWYERS

2021-2022 PRESIDENT  
MICHAEL O'DONNELL  
AND BRETT O'DONNELL  
OF DENVER AND POINTS  
WEST COLORADO

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# MICHAEL L. O'DONNELL – OUR 72ND PRESIDENT

MIKE O'DONNELL, THE INCOMING 72ND PRESIDENT OF THE COLLEGE, WAS A BIG MAN ON CAMPUS. LITERALLY. THAT IS, HE WAS, OCCASIONALLY, ON CAMPUS. AND HE WAS BIG. SIX FOOT SIX. HE WAS A BIG MAN THROUGHOUT HIGH SCHOOL, AS THE ANCHOR OF THE LOYOLA ACADEMY RAMBLER'S TENNIS TEAM, LEADING THEM TO FOUR STRAIGHT CHICAGO CATHOLIC LEAGUE CHAMPIONSHIPS. AT NOTRE DAME, HE CAPTAINED THE TENNIS TEAM. HE WAS REALLY SOMETHING BACK THEN. BUT WHEN HE GRADUATED IN 1976 AND BEGAN LAW SCHOOL AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DENVER, HE WAS STARTING OVER; HE DIDN'T KNOW ANYONE, AND WITHOUT HIS RACQUET, HE WASN'T QUITE SO BIG. HE COULDN'T GET A DATE, NOT IN THE ENTIRE STATE OF COLORADO. MIKE HAD A BUDDY IN WYOMING, A TEAMMATE FROM NOTRE DAME, PAT MURPHY, WHO HAD JUST STARTED LAW SCHOOL AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING. PAT HAD CHARM. AND MORE DATES THAN HE COULD HANDLE. HE OFFERED TO SET MIKE UP. AND WITH NO OTHER REAL OPTIONS, MIKE DROVE ONE HUNDRED AND THIRTY MILES TO TAKE AN UNDERGRADUATE COED TO A TENNIS MATCH FEATURING BJORN BORG. OCTOBER 2, 1976. MIKE HIT THE BLIND DATE JACKPOT. BRETT LONG. SPECTACULAR.

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Thanks, Pat. Their next date wasn't until 1977 (130 miles is a long drive, even for spectacular), but Mike somehow talked Brett into marriage right after his law school graduation in 1979. Forty-two years, three kids and one grandkid later, Mike and Brett are going strong.

Mike O'Donnell has taken more than seventy-five cases to verdict and has appeared as lead defense counsel in over forty different states in class and mass actions, product liability, professional liability, and complex commercial matters for highly visible compa- ▶





nies, such as General Electric, Michelin, Boston Scientific, and Pfizer. If you're curious about the details of Mike's career, visit his website and spend a few hours with his twelve-page resume (it takes every bit of those twelve pages to list his many achievements). But we don't write these pieces on incoming presidents to echo their marketing department write-ups. We want you to get to know something about the person and their family, as opposed to his or her legal credentials.

Mike was raised on the West side of Chicago – St. Mel's Parish – and later in the North suburb of Deerfield. Mike's dad, Larry, was an architect who, after a successful career with the internationally renowned Perkins & Will, formed his own firm, O'Donnell Wicklund, & Pigozzi, growing it into the largest architecture firm in Chicago. Mike's mom, Alice, was an inner-city schoolteacher who was selected Illinois teacher of the year. Alice's mother, also Alice, was also an inner-city Chicago schoolteacher and a huge influence on Mike. The family moved into Grams' apartment when Mike was born and stayed there until Mike was eight – when the family, Grams included, moved to the

suburbs. When Mike moved to Denver for law school, Grams rode in the car with him – at age ninety – so that they could spend some quality time together. Grams lived another ten years, each of them cherished by Mike.

Mike has a brother, Kevin, and two sisters, Maureen and Kerry. And when you look at the family picture and see Mike tower over his siblings and parents, there is the temptation to ask Mike if he ever sought to find his birth parents – how could he possibly be related to these normal sized people? Ah, but then you look at the family photo of Mike and Brett's family – at the baptism of their first and certainly not last grandchild – and you see that Mike towers there too. He really is a big guy.

Growing up, Mike worked as an Andy Frain usher at Cubs games. I'm pretty sure he's the guy my friends and I would yell at to, "Sit down, we can't see the game over you!"

When Mike graduated from law school, Brett herself started law school at DU – so there was no thought of leaving Colorado to return to Illinois. Brett was

and is a Wyoming girl, and while Colorado isn't quite Wyoming, close enough. Brett is as comfortable in a dusty old Stetson as she is in an evening gown and Mike was just starting to get the cowboy thing himself, so they settled on settling in Denver. Brett earned her JD degree in 1982; she took the bar exam while nursing their first child Conor. Mike hung out in the parking lot so Brett could give Conor sustenance during her breaks.

Mike joined White and Steele, P.C. then moved to Parcel, Mauro, Hultin & Spaanstra, P.C. as head of litigation. In 1998, Mike, **Mal Wheeler** and **Jack Trigg** (all Fellows of the College) formed Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell LLP. From its inception with five founding partners and a handful of associates, WTO has now grown into a firm of over 100, eight of them FACTLs, doing nothing but litigation. As Chair, Mike describes the guiding principle of the firm's growth: "Do the right thing in the smartest way." Ah, yes, but that's a lot to put on a promotional coffee cup or ball point pen; so it boils down to "No jerks."

Mike's father, Larry, instilled in Mike a strong commitment to charitable work.



It was important to Mike to establish the WTO Foundation in 2005. Since its creation, the Foundation has donated more than \$2.3 million to over 100 nonprofit organizations. But it isn't just about the dollars. Mike all but requires everyone in his firm not simply to write a check but to actually *do* something, such as going to a homeless center to serve meals. Firm personnel volunteer both money and time, giving countless hours to Foundation causes.

From its inception, WTO has honored the old ways of treating the practice of law as a profession, not a business. Mike teaches his lawyers that their loyalties must always be to “Client, firm, self – in that order.” No wonder that WTO has been recognized as the best firm to work at in Denver.

We mentioned the family. Brett and Mike have three children, Conor, Devon and Danny. Conor Lyons O'Donnell (the “Lyons” may simply be an extended family name or an actual homage to Mike's cousin, **FACTL Jim Lyons** – I didn't ask . . .) is an artist, with a BFA degree from the Rhode Island School of Design and an MA

from The University of the Arts in London. While in London, Conor met Jenna Quinn, of County Donegal, Ireland. They were married in Ireland; Jenna, who has an MS from National University of Ireland, Galway, works for Accenture.

Devon earned her MBA from the University of Denver. Her husband, Brad Stevenson, also has an MBA (from Harvard), plus a medical degree. And they too were married at a castle in Ireland. Their daughter Remy is the first O'Donnell grandchild.

Daniel graduated from the University of Michigan and did post-grad work at the University of Virginia; he is Director of Business Development at Avanti Financial Group. Getting Mike to stay in Denver in 1979 was one thing. But somehow Brett has managed to convince all three of her children and their families to live within a ten-minute drive of Mike and Brett's home. Told you she was spectacular. Daniel is under strict orders to limit dating to Zip Codes in the low 80000s, although another wedding in Ireland would be OK.

Mike says, “I'm hoping not to be thinking of cases on my deathbed.” When you talk to Mike, as proud as he is – as justified as he is to be proud – of his career, family is clearly more important. But as to the cases, as Mike looks back at a career that remains in its prime, he views his most important cases as the ones where he represented individuals, where he made a tangible difference to a person's life or career. He has had more than his share of billion-dollar cases, but the small cases, the cases that mean everything to a single person, are the ones that stand out. Sounds like another lesson he learned from Larry.

Mike and Brett are looking forward to their year in the Presidency of the College. Brett is looking forward to meeting new and old friends around the country, as is Mike – and Mike hopes to put special emphasis on outreach and getting us all back together as we emerge from the pandemic strangeness. We're all looking forward to a great year with Mike and Brett.

**Bob Byman**  
**Chicago, IL**