

# THE OKLAHOMAN

## Attorney mom of special needs child chooses law, motherhood

By [Paula Burkes](#)

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GableGotwals attorney Ellen Adams put her firm's family friendly policies to the test eight years ago when she delivered a child with special needs. Adams was given all the time and flexibility she needed to balance her family's and the firm's commitments.

Today, Adams, with a Tulsa colleague, co-chairs the firm's Women's Initiative Committee to retain and recruit the best talent possible.

The committee's members are both female and male; shareholders and associates, Adams said. "We see this as a firm, not a female, goal, so we included both genders at every level," she said.

More women are graduating law school, Adams said, but law firms overall struggle to retain women — and men — who may leave for corporate in-house counsel jobs or to take positions elsewhere.

Her firm, which employs 91 attorneys; 17 of the women, offers many family friendly policies, including 12 weeks paid maternity leave for new mothers and two weeks paid paternity leave for new fathers.

From her 15th floor offices in the north tower of downtown's Leadership Square, Adams, 35, sat down with *The Oklahoman* on Tuesday to talk about her life and career. This is an edited transcript:

**Q: Tell us about your roots.**

**A:** I was born in New York, but my dad soon after was transferred here with his job. He worked in food distribution and management; primarily produce. My mom was a homemaker. Before she had my brother and me, she worked as an educator in an institutional setting for children with special needs.

Today, my parents are both retired. My brother works as a petroleum engineer for Devon and is the father of two boys; a third is on the way. We all live within 15 minutes of one another.

**Q: What was your thing growing up?**

**A:** From first grade on, I competed in dance including ballet, jazz and tap. Dancing gave me a competitive spirit, and I learned that hard work pays off. I remember professional dance teachers, in from L.A., really pushing us. If they caught you yawning, they'd say, "No one cares if you're tired." When I was in high school, I had the opportunity to teach dance to little kids, and receive a discount on my own dance lessons.

**Q: How did you meet your husband?**

**A:** We met in high school. I was a junior at OCS (Oklahoma Christian School in Edmond) and he was a senior at Santa Fe High School. One of my dance friends introduced us. We both went to OU, though Chad finished at the University of Wyoming where he'd always dreamed of going.

After OU, I was set on going to law school at the University of Texas in Austin. But Chad came back from Wyoming and proposed. I called OU's law school, which had offered me a scholarship, to confirm that the offer still stood — and that I could delay it a year. Then, I worked a year in Laramie, Wyo., where Chad and I enjoyed the mountains together.

**Q: The year you lived in Wyoming, you sold cars for a Toyota dealership. What lessons did you learn?**

**A:** How to layer my clothing to work outside in the cold weather. Ha-ha. No seriously, any time you work with people, it's a learning opportunity. I'm an introvert, so by selling cars I learned to be more of an extrovert, to look at customers' perspectives and make sure I was meeting their needs. Previously, I'd waited tables and sold cosmetics at a

Dillard's Estee Lauder counter. So those jobs gave me my initial training in customer service, as well as copious amounts of free cosmetics. As an attorney, I still feel I'm working in the service industry, with a constant eye on client needs.

**Q: What kind of law do you practice?**

**A:** When I started in 2007, I focused on oil and gas law, but I since have moved also into the labor and employment arena. Lawyers love learning, and expanding my practice gave me an opportunity to explore different areas of the law.

I also get to work with employers across a broad swath of industries. It's fascinating to learn about their different businesses.

**Q: Your elder daughter has Down syndrome. Did you know she was a special-needs child while you were carrying her?**

**A:** No. I didn't know there was anything wrong until I had a routine ultrasound at 34 weeks. The technologist left the room for a long time and when she returned, she handed me the phone, said my doctor wanted to talk with me, and then left the room and closed the door. My doctor told me my baby had a brain defect and was missing a chamber in her heart. That same day, I had a more advanced ultrasound with a specialist, who recommended I have my baby immediately by emergency cesarean section. When she was born, Emma weighed 3 pounds, 3 ounces. My thumb print was bigger than her footprint on the birth certificate. By the time I was discharged, they'd diagnosed her with Down syndrome. It was really difficult because I was discharged, but Emma stayed in the hospital another six weeks. They immediately put a shunt in her brain because she was born with hydrocephalus. I went back to work two weeks later, delaying my maternity leave for when Emma was released from the hospital.

Emma suffered congestive heart failure and underwent open-heart surgery two weeks after she was discharged, and two months later — the very day I returned to work — she had another emergency, ultimately resulting in a second open-heart surgery a few months later in Dallas, where I worked remotely until she recovered. It was eight months before Emma weighed eight pounds. But today, she's a healthy, exuberant, sometimes mischievous 8-year-old who loves her 3-year-old baby sister.

**Q: What does the term “work-life balance” mean to you?**

**A:** With my early stresses with Emma, I valued an opportunity to come to work and have a space I could focus on something I could control. Today, I — after a long day at work — get to go home to two lovely kids, who make me laugh and smile and forget about stress at work. Conversely, a 3 year old and 8 year old create stress in their own ways. My colleagues at GableGotwals are my friends.

And at home, I also have a great support system. My husband is committed to giving me the opportunity to come to work, and picks up where I leave off. Plus, he's a great cook, making homemade Caesar salad dressing and grilling perfect steaks. And more often than not, Emma's grandmothers take her to her weekly physical, speech and occupational therapy sessions.

Being a mom and a full-time attorney is not easy. But for me, there are benefits in doing both.

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**PERSONALLY SPEAKING**

Position: GableGotwals law firm, shareholder and co-chair of the Women’s Initiative Committee

Birth date/childhood home: Nov. 3, 1980/Edmond

Family: Chad, husband of 12 years and owner of a small oil and gas company; and daughters Emma, 8, and Abby, 3

Education: University of Oklahoma, bachelor’s and law degrees

Residence: west Edmond; Emma attends Deer Creek Public Schools

Free time: active family outings, including pool days, carnivals and festivals, Special Olympics and softball and soccer games through The Miracle League and TopSoccer for young athletes with disabilities. The Adams family spent its summer vacation floating the Rio Grande in New Mexico.