

Oral History: Abby Abinanti

Interviewed by Mary Louise Frampton
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Part 2 Life and the Law

Mary Louise Frampton: Thinking about the river -- we're sitting here looking at the mouth of the Klamath River where it meets the ocean. So we've talked about the importance of place and I wanted to ask you about what does this place mean for you, and to the extent that you can say for the tribe.

Abby Abinanti: Well for me personally, it's everything. It is the center of my thinking it is where I come when I need help; it's where I come. It provides food, it provides everything, and it calms a person down, it makes you able to go forward and you know that it will help you as long as you meet your responsibility to it. Now, if you don't pay attention, and we kill off the salmon, then where will we be? We're in partnership with the environment and with the people, like the salmon and whatever, who are here and we have to do our part. And you can't just run around like a maniac, killing off things because you're in the mood or you're hungry that night, and go, "Well, this is the last salmon I'll just eat it." You can't do that. You can't act like that. So to me, it is what defines us as a people is that responsibility to that reciprocal responsibility and understanding that, understanding that you're not the only game in town know that you're not even the biggest game in town, frankly. So it changes how you move in the world I think and how you understand your responsibilities. Not to mention it's beautiful.

Frampton: It's gorgeous; it's a beautiful day today. So tell me a little bit about your grandparents.

Abinanti: Well, my mother was one of three girls, I know she was the youngest; he was killed during the course of one of his bank robberies in southern Oregon and left their mother, my grandmother, to raise the kids. And I think he'd just from what I've known of the old people who talked about him, said he just didn't care for being confined, to being on the reservation, he didn't even care about the money that much, 'cause he had robbed banks and then take it and give it to everybody and I think he didn't make the transition well, I guess is the best way to say it. And he had a temper which apparently they say I inherited I don't know. Hard to believe.

Frampton: Because you never knew him.

Abinanti: No, I never did. But the old guys one day when I was young, much, much

younger, we were somewhere, I don't know where and they were talking around the fire, and they were all talking in Yurok and they were all looked at me and started laughing, and so I said to one of them, I said, "What are you guys talking about? And he said, "Oh we're talking about how you're like Marion", which is my grandpa. I said, "Charming I'm sure." And he said, "That's not what we were saying." I said, "Somehow I knew that." He said, "You have the same temperament." I said, "Oops." I've tried to curb that, though.

Frampton: And your grandmother did you know her?

Abinanti: I knew her, I think her life was very hard and very difficult and she was, in many ways, very abusive to my mom and to her sisters but they lived in a really hard time and his behavior didn't make it any easier. My mother remembers the Klan burning a cross, in their yard, and it frightened them, they were just little kids, and I'm sure that would frighten anyone. So, she, my grandmother and I were not particularly close. I thought she was mean, I guess, in many ways, but then you could look at her and you go, "If she wasn't she probably wouldn't have survive." So, easy for me to say.

Frampton: And where did she grow up?

Abinanti: She grew up up here.

Frampton: Right here? In Klamath?

Abinanti: No, no in up Weitchpec in up in there.

Frampton: So she had your mother and two other girls. And where did your mother grow up?

Abinanti: She grew up up there; Blue Lake here, Eureka, around a lot of different places, I think, and the other girls did, too. I know they went to boarding school, although they never talked about it. I found out when I was grown actually that they had gone, my mother and her sisters went to San Francisco during World War II, like a lot of native people and worked in war industry there, and that's where she met my father and I think that my aunts met men there too, then they all moved home pretty quickly after the war.

Frampton: So you were born in San Francisco?

Abinanti: I was born in San Francisco, yeah.

Frampton: And then you moved back up here near Arcata, when you were about two?

Abinanti: Yeah, well, younger, I don't remember San Francisco. I remember my father's mother, because I would go visit her a lot, but other than that, and his father.

Frampton: And was he native, your father?

Abinanti: No, he wasn't. His people were from Sicily.

Frampton: Ah. So when he eventually became an engineer, your father.

Abinanti: Yeah, a highway engineer. Yeah.

Frampton: So you grew up right around Arcata.

Abinanti: Right.

Frampton: And talk about your those years of growing up there.

Abinanti: Well I think it was a difficult, my mother very early on, started having drug problems. My aunts both had drinking problems, and it made for a chaotic situation for young people, for kids. And my dad took to going on work assignments out of town and my brother was with him or with other people that my dad placed him with. My mom got institutionalized a couple of times. And then we would be placed with people in the community, which I never particularly took to very well and I don't think in retrospect -- I probably did not behave very well with them.

Frampton: Understandably.

Abinanti: Well, I don't know about that, but eventually I just stayed with her and they didn't really bother her anymore. And then eventually I realized that she's not going to make it, and I need to leave, if I'm going to make it. And so I did when I was about 17 or 18 and went to school.

Frampton: So during those, you say in junior high and high school, did you have connections with the tribal folks of your?

Abinanti: Not a lot here because my mom really didn't have connections with people that much. And she didn't encourage them, and it's not like people wanted to let their kids come over to my house, for any particular reason. I didn't so much and when I left, I did and I told her that's what I was going to do and she said, "Okay I appreciate that you told me, but I don't want to talk about it", And I said, "Fine." So we never did.

Frampton: And she never talked about her boarding school experience?

Abinanti: No, none of them wanted do that, they would just wouldn't. The only reason I knew is I got in an argument over... She was the youngest and there was some sort of, "You got us all in trouble because you were crying and a big baby." I don't know, just sister stuff. I was like, "What you guys talking about"? They were like, "We're not talking to you," so that was it.

Frampton: So why do you think they didn't talk to you about that?

Abinanti: I don't think it was pleasant. And I think that's a... You can see it's a cultural habit. It's like the three big incidences up here were after the invasion you have people coming for gold or salmon, or timber, and then you have massacres that accompany those because then they want what you have, and so, they just kill you to take it. And then you had a whole movement of indentured slaves. And the best slaves are children because you can take them and they don't know any different, you raise them and you just put them to work right away. And then the boarding schools, so you have all that really difficult behavior that you're giving people so they don't learn like they should, and that's, creates havoc later that we're still dealing with, frankly.

Frampton: And that's part of what the Wellness Court is dealing with now.

Abinanti: And we try to get people up because it wasn't that long ago to go back and go, "Yeah, this sort of behavior that you have come into your family at what point? Who? Go talk to the oldest people in your family and figure this out while you still can. You need to know why you're acting like this because this is not who we are. And you know better and are better, so figure it out. Let me, let us help you figure it out, so we can put a stop to this."

Frampton: So your mother did talk to you about this Klan burning though, or someone talked to you about it?

Abinanti: Yeah, I don't know that it was her. I think she did say that.

Frampton: So what did you learn about that?

Abinanti: Not much, that it frightened her and as she grew older, she refused to go out of the house, she did not want to mix around white people, and she didn't retain her ties with people in her own family really or extended family.

Frampton: So at some point did you say at 17 you said, "I need to."

Abinanti: Yeah, well, she couldn't really function, and she was pretty debilitated by then and then she died when I was in law school. And that was a long time ago and she was buried in town. But then a few years ago, I finally thought she's had enough of that so I got her and I moved her home and she's down here now in our cemetery. I created a cemetery down here, there's one up on for us, for the rubes on the eastern end of the reservation. But since I'm working here, I decided to stay here and it wasn't like she was never here 'cause they would come down here and fish, so I moved her here.

Frampton: But her death was very hard for you.

Abinanti: It was hard because she never had a chance to do or to be happy or to come back from that and she lived... Her life was not easy and she just couldn't save herself. Now, I felt in many ways, she was strong enough to save me, to say, "Go, go, go," but not strong enough to save herself, and I think that's sad. I appreciate it, but it's still sad for

me that that happened for her.

Frampton: So when she said, "Go," you went to Humboldt.

Abinanti: Yeah.

Frampton: You had the right to go to college right? So talk about that. Do you remember those times?

Abinanti: Well, I remember them and school was always a sort of double-edged sword if it hadn't been for teachers taking an extra interest in me, I would never have made it. And then there were teachers who took an extra interest in me and hated me and that was really difficult and were just awful. And I don't care what a child is doing. You can't, and there's no excuse for behaving like that, so it happens and you just put it behind you or I did. There's nothing you can do about that. But there were some very good people who really took extra time with me and who helped me and who said, "Go to college, do this, do that." And I had a high school teacher who created, I wouldn't say it was a fake scholarship exactly. But it was sort of a fake scholarship.,

Frampton: A made up one.

Abinanti: Yeah. And so I got a scholarship and I was like, "Wow, I guess I'll go to college", it wasn't a whole lot, but it was something, and so that was nice.

Frampton: So what a contrast that we talked about, your being Indian in high school and how that created a lot of negative energy from some of the teachers just...

Abinanti: Well, it wasn't just high school; it was elementary school, too. They just, some people, I don't know who raised them. Yeah, I often say I was raised by a drug addict and I have better manners than some of the people I see walking around. It's like, "Good God."

Frampton: Do you remember anything specifically?

Abinanti: I remember stuff, but it's like there's no point in... And people did awful things and that's on them. It's not, it's done now, but they carry that with them. And the part that I have with me is I've chosen to go, "That's not going to make me different in any sense", except to go, "I'll never act like that, I'll never act like that." I'll never just pick on a child because of their color or call him stupid or do whatever. I just wouldn't do it.

Frampton: So you were at Humboldt, and how long were you there?

Abinanti: Five years. And then, I don't know if you remember the... Well, we talked about it before, the scholarship program for Native Americans.

Frampton: So talk about that.

Abinanti: Well they created – it was during that time when they decided that because there were no Indian lawyers that they should underwrite a scholarship program. And so, some older Indian women called me and said, "Oh, you can go to law school" and I'm like, "I could except I don't want to." You know, "Where is it?" And they said it was in New Mexico at the pre-law program and I said, "I'm not going," and so we had a big old fight. And one thing, the advantage of being old, now as I have that advantage, too, which is you do not win fights with old Indian ladies. I lost, and I went to law school.

Frampton: So were these women Yurok or?

Abinanti: Oh yeah.

Frampton: Yeah. And they said, "We need lawyers."

Abinanti: And, "You're the only one graduating so you can just go." And I'm like, "I don't want to go." The only lawyers I knew were, I'd friends and stuff that would get in trouble, but, no Perry Masons, so I was like, "No." But then I went.

Frampton: And you'd never been to New Mexico?

Abinanti: No, I'd never been anywhere really.

Frampton: So, you went off to the summer program.

Abinanti: Yeah, I flew over there. And then, I would call back crying around and they were like, "Just suck it up," and I'm like, "Come and get me or I'm just going to run away" and they said, "No, you won't 'cause you're too scared so we're not coming to get you." So that was that. So I finished and then I went back and I went to Davis, for a year.

Frampton: So Davis was very tough.

Abinanti: Yeah, I didn't do really well there, so I went there and that was the year Alcatraz had happened right before that, and then DQ happened.

Frampton: So, Abby, talk more about what was happening at DQ.

Abinanti: It was basically a federal facility that they were abandoning, and the students had decided to take it over and turn it into a university for Native Americans and Chicanos. And it went on for quite a while, but then it just couldn't get off. It couldn't sustain itself, so, just couldn't find the support.

Frampton: And there are still efforts to re-invigorate it even today.

Abinanti: Well, those efforts to do a tribally controlled school in California. We don't really have one. I know that they're trying to do one in the Sacramento area now and I think they're making a good effort at that so...

Frampton: So, the students had taken over this federal facility, and what were they doing?

Abinanti: They were just basically occupying. It was an occupation.

Frampton: OK.

Abinanti: And some of the older native people came with guns and we really weren't... That's not what we wanted to do, and so that's why Dave (Risling) had come to me and said, "You need to go out there" and I said "You know, that made sense to me."

Frampton: So, when you went out, how did you persuade them to either leave their guns behind, or leave?

Abinanti: Must have been my personal charm.

Frampton: Do you have any recollection of that?

Abinanti: I remember discussions and it was basically our homeland, our decision in my mind, and so this... We stayed the course on that until that was the decision that was made.

Frampton: So were there discussions about what this, what DQ would be like, what the curriculum would be, what?

Abinanti: There were eventually, not in that first part, there was just, it was very cold and it was concrete buildings, and it was difficult, it wasn't a pleasure outing.

Frampton: So how much time did you spend out there?

Abinanti: A few weeks, maybe a little longer than that.

Frampton: And did you?

Abinanti: I was never much of a student, let me just say. So I would habitually miss tons of school no matter what, whether I was in grammar school or high school or college or law school, I spent more time away from school than I ever spent in school, I just wasn't, I didn't take to classes that well.

Frampton: Yes, so talk about that, that...

Abinanti: Well, right before that had happened, a couple of months before that, I had

been hospitalized at the school's hospital, and I had, I didn't know what was wrong with me, I was in a lot of pain and I never went to doctors or anything like that. And finally they came and said, "You're suffering from malnutrition. Why aren't you eating?" And I said, "Well, I ran out of money, so I had to eat just the amount of money I had." And so then they had all these students come in because they had never seen a real live malnutrition patient, which was embarrassing. And finally one Indian nurse walked in and she said, "Who are you"? And I told her that I was Yurok and she's like, "Oh, for God's sakes." And so then she went over and called Dave Risling who was the head of the Indian Center, and said, "You've got some knucklehead kid over here." So he walks over and he basically says, "Who are you?" And I told them who my grandfather was. And he's just like, "Oh, my God."

He said, "Why don't you come over to the Indian Center"? I said, "'Cause I didn't know there was one." And so he said, "OK I'm going to write this address down. This is my niece, when you get out of here, you go there every night for dinner. Do you understand what I'm saying to you"? I said, "Yes sir, yes sir." And that was the end of that. And so then I got out of the hospital, and I went over to her house every night for dinner, and the dean was really mad because he thought I was just as an embarrassment to him and he got in a fight with the dean of the medical school, I guess, because he thought I was just trying to get out of finals. And the dean on the medical school was ticked off and they just had this thing. And so then I went back to school and it was fine, and then Dave came and asked me a couple of months later, he said, "You need to go out to DQ, and stay with those kids because they're talking about bringing guns in there, and our kids don't know anything about that, and I don't want that to happen." And they couldn't go out there 'cause they were professors and I was the oldest kid on campus. So I...

Frampton: And you were a law student.

Abinanti: Yeah.

Frampton: Yeah.

Abinanti: And he said, "So you need to go out there." So I said, "OK." So I went out there and then the dean of the law school got mad and sent somebody out and told me to come back and I said, "You can tell him you told me, but I'm not coming back." And so after I got rid of the kids with the guns and I felt like it was secure and I could leave responsibly, then I went back to law school. But he was furious. And so then I finished up and I didn't realize that, that there was a rule of that as I was walking out of school, the last day of school. I mean I did some stuff I shouldn't have done. I always parked in a red zone in front of the school and I had convinced the parking guy that it was for Indians only. And he said, "It can't be -- nobody else parks there." I said, "Well, I'm the only Indian in the school."

Frampton: Yeah.

Abinanti: And he went, "Oh, OK", so I never got a ticket. And I think the Dean must

have heard about that 'cause he wasn't happy about that, either, but it my follows my philosophy. If you're going to tell a lie, tell a really big lie, 'cause, why not. And so he said, "I'm not going to certify you." I asked the Dean -- he stopped me on the way out and I said, "As what"? He said, "Well, if you're not certified, you can't go on to the second year, and I have to certify that you attended and you know you didn't." He said, "I'll certify you if you leave."

And I said, "OK." So I called this guy, Hunter Gere, who was our assistant at the program and he was like this classic, West Texas, red neck and how he got saddled with all of us I will never know. But I said, "Hunter, he just threw me out of the law school." He said, "What did you do"? And I said, "I didn't do anything." He said, "You're lying, you're always are up to something." And I'm like, "Hunter that's not fair, man." And he's like, "What did you do"? I said, "Nothing, nothing." He said, "Doesn't even matter." He said, "Call me back in a week." And I called him back in a week or so and I said, "What's going on"? He said, "There's not a, basically, there's not a God damn law school in the whole country that'll take you, so you might as well come to New Mexico." I said, "Well how gracious, I will, thank you." So I did. And then my two best friends from the program also got thrown out of their law schools, so one in Montana, and one in Oklahoma and he was raging at us. "You guys were always trouble." And we're like, "Hunter, that's just not fair, it wasn't our fault. He's like, "It was your fault. It's always your fault. You guys are always in trouble." "Hunter that's not, that's not true man." He's like, "God you're such knuckleheads." But he, I mean, he would cuss us out but he would always cover our backs.

Frampton: And take care of you.

Abinanti: Yeah. We probably aged him.

Frampton: So what was that (like) with not having the money to eat and being first year in law school and being the only Native person there at the law school?

Abinanti: Well, I didn't have enough sense to know that I should go look for somebody or get help 'cause I'd never been away from home, and so I didn't really know how to act and nobody likes to be hungry, but it just, it happened. And I could have asked for help. I think other students would have helped me, but I just didn't know them. And I didn't really know how to interact with them, and I met people afterwards who said, "You know, why didn't you at least for ask for help?" And it just wasn't something I would have done. I didn't mind taking help from Dave, because he was from home and he was, I knew who he was, and that made sense to me. That's pretty much why.

Frampton: I'm just thinking there must have been such a contrast thinking about DQ being just a few miles from the law school, but what you were experiencing in the law school, and then meeting a lot of new people, I assume at DQ and...

Abinanti: Well, I knew the people, they're under-graduates, by then I had met the undergraduates at the campus, so I knew them and some people came over from San

Francisco and stuff like that, that I didn't know, but most of the young people I knew from Northern California, I knew them, I had met them by then.

Frampton: And have you kept in touch with any of those people?

Abinanti: Oh yeah, 'cause some of them were from home. They were also there. I know them.

Frampton: If you had been given the option of staying at Davis, would you preferred to do that than to go to New Mexico, do you think?

Abinanti: I don't know. I did a lot there, I learned a lot of things, I learned... Because for a lot of out-of-state Indians, they didn't even know about Californian Indians and we had not ever -- the whole getting together as different groups of Indians. We just never did that much when I was really young, and they were all Palo dancers, we weren't. So it was a time when I got to meet a lot of Indians, I would not have met otherwise. And I think over the years, I've kept friendships that I had there, and that's been important to me. And I have a lot of very good feelings for New Mexico and for that law school because... But for them taking me and I wouldn't be a lawyer and not that I wanted to be one in the first place, but it was, they were kind. I'll always remember that.

Frampton: New Mexico— You graduated from the law school there, was it always your thought to come back to California, after law school?

Abinanti: Oh, yeah, I never intended to stay out there.

Frampton: So, thinking about the bar, as you describe yourself, you hadn't been a student, was it pretty intimidating, thinking about taking the bar?

Abinanti: Well, not really, because in New Mexico, the bar -- I went to school with people who weren't that worried about it, so when I came back, I wasn't that worried about it, and consequently I flunked it. So then I went, "That's not OK because a lot of people are looking at you and you need to do better." And I knew before I took it that I wasn't going to pass it 'cause I had messed around and partied and whatever, I was not concentrating. Come up here and went to dances, did whatever. So the second time I took it, I was like, "OK, this is going to be different." So I locked myself in my apartment in San Francisco and I had a tank of gas when I started studying and I had half a tank when I finished studying two months later, 'cause I said, "I'm done with this, I'm going to pass this." And so I did, I passed it the second time. I had gone to the classes, the first time and I said, "I should never have done what I know doesn't work for me which was going to classes," and I just locked myself in the house and learn it.

Frampton: And do it yourself.

Abinanti: Yeah, which I did. And then at one point, this young man came over who I had studied with, whose name I have long forgotten. I think he went on to be an AG and he

said, "You're never going to pass real property, 'cause you just don't get it. So I'm going to come over and spend... I'm going to tell you exactly what you need to know and just do that." He said, "'Cause you're a dead-bang loser on this." I said, "OK." So he did and he spent eight hours going over it with me and said, "This is what you need to know and he gave me what I was supposed to study for the rest of it, and so I passed 'cause he just said, "You're just useless." And he was right.

Frampton: And was it just because the whole thing seemed ridiculous to you?

Abinanti: I don't know. I just could not get it in my head. It just wouldn't stick in there. It was truly very different from how I believe. It just wouldn't get in there. It just kept drilling out my ears or wherever it went, I don't know where it went, but he gave me enough, he said, "And do this right the week before, focus and you'll hold on to it long enough." So I did.

Frampton: So talk about that, how contrary that is to your belief system.

Abinanti: It was just very different, owning it and it's yours. I don't know. I never could get it that well. I do it now and I certainly have probated stuff and I pay attention to it. But just the whole thing was just like it was not making any sense and I actually barely passed it in law school, which should have been a clue to me. I think I had to retake it and I kept not doing well in it. I don't know.

Frampton: Well, it's so hard to learn something that is so contrary to your beliefs, and it's so destructive.

Abinanti: Yeah.

Frampton: So you're now a lawyer and you've passed the bar and you go to work for a California Indian Legal Services. Is that what you'd always had in mind to do?

Abinanti: Pretty much 'cause it was the only thing I knew. I did that and I went in between for a little bit. I went and clerked in the Virgin Islands, for several months for a judge and she was the first Virgin Island's attorney to be a judge.

Frampton: And how did you happen to have that opportunity?

Abinanti: I just went there to visit somebody who I knew from school and they were advertising for a law clerk, so I went and she hired me. I thought, "OK, I might as well stay." And then I got a job in a hotel, so I could work for a room and board in the hotel and so I did that for, I think nine months, and then I went to her and I said... I might have done that... 'Cause after I passed the bar, I got an offer from CILS again to come back to go to Eureka and I went and I told her, "It's my home, I really want to go." And she said, "Go" she let me out of my bi-year contract.

Frampton: So CILS in Eureka. And was the practice what you had anticipated?

Abinanti: Pretty much, and a lot of work and I stayed there for a number of years and I went into... Then the Ford Foundation had that fellowship where you could go into private practice, and I qualified for that, so I got that one.

Frampton: So talk about that fellowship.

Abinanti: It gave you enough money to start a practice, a small practice. So I did it, and I traveled a lot, to represent tribes and did different things, and I became a union lawyer, and I represented police unions. So that was entertaining for everyone.

Frampton: So was this private practice in Eureka?

Abinanti: Yeah.

Frampton: But you traveled all around the state?

Abinanti: The northern part of the state mostly. And then I would go, I would teach at different reservations in California, and out of California. And did a lot of litigation around the Indian Child Welfare Act when it came in.

Frampton: And were you happy doing that?

Abinanti: Yeah. I was, it's just very hard to travel all that and be constantly on the road and...

Frampton: And support a practice. It was hard.

Abinanti: Yeah. And I didn't like charging people and then if they didn't have money, I would just do it and I wasn't really good at it. The money part of it.

Frampton: So did you have an administrator or?

Abinanti: I think I did most of it, which meant that it didn't really get done, or I'd trade for fish or I'd trade for whatever.

Frampton: Well, those were the years when we first met, because we were part of that first board of California Women Lawyers. With representatives from around the state and Fay Stender was on that board. So what do you remember about the late great Fay Stender.

Abinanti: Well, she was great. I went to see her after she got shot and we had a visit and I knew pretty much she wasn't going to come home when she left. And she just didn't have that desire to live that way, and I could understand. I wish it was different. I think she could have contributed more, but it was her call, and I wasn't going to... It was a searing incident for everybody, I think.

Frampton: So what was that experience like being on that board for you?

Abinanti: The whole politics of the time were very odd to me. And the interchanges and the interactions and the behaviors and there's just stuff that you're just like, "Wow." I remember we were in, I was in Chicago, some place with a bunch of people and we were doing something and these young lawyers all thought... I was with some African-American lawyers and primarily women and the young non... Young men who were not Indian or black thought we were whores that were coming to their meeting. Apparently somebody had set up and it was a really unpleasant exchange between us, and them. And then some of the African-American male lawyers flipped out, which I cannot blame them, and so it was not a pretty scene, and it's just stuff like that, and you go, "Good God." It's what I mean about being raised by somebody who's a drug addict and we just didn't behave like that, so I didn't really have... We would not have acted like that.

There's just things like that. And then they may have been political agendas and I could find some of that very worth supporting. And you look at things and you go, 'cause you only look at your own experience when you're that young and you go, "This is what happened to me," and then you see what happened to other people and you go, 'Man there's a lot of people not being treated right.' And then when people get... Here, like if you're the headman of a village or you have this responsibility, then you're responsible to feed everyone. There they just get more and more and keep it themselves and you go, "I don't even know what you do with a billion dollars." In the first place, I don't even know how many zeros it is, but why would you want more than... More billions? What are you going to do with it? Because they don't do anything with it, they just have it.

And then you go, "Look at all these people who are hungry, how can you act like that?" or "don't have houses or don't have whatever." I don't understand it. I don't think I ever have understood it, I probably never will. It's just one of those things where I just can't imagine it. It's beyond what... It's beyond my experience and it's beyond... Like when my mom was gone and stuff, or when she couldn't help me, I lived with other people and... Or when Dave came and said, "This is where you're going to eat and this is what you're going to do." That's what I'm used to, and I don't know these other stuff, I just don't know what... I see it, but I don't know how you could live with yourself, I guess.

Frampton: So you're in private practice and you're happy doing what you're doing, but it's hard work, and you're traveling a lot, and then an opportunity comes.

Abinanti: Well, a person I had met in that group that you and I were talking about earlier was on the bench and she... There came an opening for a commissioner, which is a judicial officer and it was in delinquency and dependency, and I knew a lot about that area of law and she asked me if I was interested and I said, I never really thought about being a judge.

Frampton: But you had been doing the echo work.

Abinanti: Yeah, and I thought, "Well, that would be a good thing to do and I could learn some stuff." And so I applied and I got selected and I stayed there for about 20 years and they were very good to me at the San Francisco Court and eventually, they let me come up here and start working up here on my own time. I worked out something with the Judicial Council, and I would take my vacation days and stuff. So I started coming up and then the more I came, the more I came, and then after they went through their financial crisis and we all got let go, this is pretty much what I do. I'll travel and give talks and stuff when people ask just 'cause it's polite, but I don't really do much besides here.

Frampton: So give us a sense of what you were doing as a commissioner for those 20 years, you were...

Abinanti: I did either delinquency or dependency primarily. I did some family law... In San Francisco the family law division does family law plus delinquency and dependency, so I was in that division. And I did primarily dependency or delinquency and working with those families, those groups of kids, and that's pretty much what I did.

Frampton: So you were seeing kids in trouble every day?

Abinanti: Yeah, yeah. Or families in trouble. And I got along pretty well at the court, and there was a couple little bumps but nothing major, they got used to me and I got used to them and that was OK.

Frampton: And how do you think your values, your worldview, impacted how you helped those children and families?

Abinanti: Well, I think that I have a different way of listening and a different way of talking to them and talking with them, and even when I would have to terminate somebody's rights, it would be like, "I know you never meant this to happen and I'm sorry, I feel bad for you," and say, "You need to... You don't know how this is going to turn out, try, keep trying regardless because many times your children will come looking for you. And you'll have something more to give and you have something to give now. You can pray for them, you can do whatever." So I would talk to them, because nobody really means for that to happen. No I don't think there's very few truly people who are so broken that they need to be away from the others because they can't help themselves. And I've seen very few of those.