There are Irishmen walking on the streets of Dublin who aren't as Irish—DNA-wise, at least—as Judge Patrick Dugan.

"I'm 99 percent, with some British Isles in there," laughs Judge Dugan, sitting in his memento-bedecked office on the 13th floor of the Justice Juanita Kidd Stout Center for Criminal Justice where his view encompasses the south side of City Hall and bustling Penn Square.

Dugan, chief judge of Philadelphia Veterans Court, descended from great-grandparents who emigrated to the US from Mayo and Cork, but his childhood wasn't steeped in his Irish heritage. "We knew we were Irish but I wasn't hearing folklore and stories," he says. "I had my awakening as a young man. It came when I was watching news of 'the Troubles' and trying to understand how we got there."

His newly awakened interest led him to the Ancient Order of Hibernians. He's a member of Div. 25 in Fox Chase. Every year he gives a speech at their annual Day of the Rope, which remembers the four members of the Molly Maguires, dissident miners, who were hanged in the jailhouse in what is now Jim Thorpe, PA, after what is now widely considered to be a judgment by a kangaroo court.

It's a different speech each year but, he says, the theme is always the same. "It takes us back to what our people had to endure when they came here," he says. "I get something new out of it every year and I reach more people who I hope understand what labor went through, what Irish immigrants went through, to get where we are as a people."

His family may not have talked about their heritage, but certainly, they had their stories—of struggle, sacrifice, heroism, and taking care of others. Those stories served as a template for Patrick Dugan's life.

There was his father's father, Joseph Dugan, a Philadelphia firefighter and World War I veteran, who in 1944 lost most of his stomach after the rope that suspended him over a blazing ship in the Delaware River suddenly broke. He survived, but his abdominal injury was so profound that he died nine months later.

Because he lingered, it was not considered a death in the line of duty so Dugan's grandmother was left with eight children and no city pension. His family later saw that this wrong was redressed. In 2011, hoseman Joseph Dugan was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor by the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 22.

And there was Dugan's mother, Jacqueline Kane. Dugan's parents divorced when he was very young and he and his four sibling were raised by their mother, who worked as a bank teller and a pie filler at Tastycake until, at 47, she got a degree in drug and alcohol counseling. "My mom's my hero," he says. "I am what she instilled in me."

Like his mom, Dugan took a circuitous route to his law career—and, like his grandfather, put himself in harm's way in the service of others. "Everything I do is always a winding road," he laughs.

In 1981, he enlisted in the Army Reserves to help pay his way through college. It was a family thing. His father, James, was a Marine Vietnam veteran. His paternal and maternal uncles all did their time in the service. He started out as a paratrooper, serving with the 82nd Airborne Division as a M60 Gunner in Recon 1/505 Airborne Infantry, in South Korea with the 2nd Infantry Division, and in Panama with the 1/508th Airborne Infantry.

“Everywhere I went I would take classes,” he says. At the end of his six years of duty, he gathered up all his credits from West Chester, Ann Arundel Community College and the University of Maryland and, at 30, enrolled in Rutgers Law School, working as a bartender at night to supplement his income. With his BA and JD in hand, he practiced law, with a special emphasis on children and the poor, for more than a decade.

Then, in 2003, shortly after the Iraq War started, he got caught up in the story of Jessica Lynch, a 19-year-old supply clerk from West Virginia who was kidnapped by Iraqi forces who attacked the convoy in which she was riding. Eleven other American soldiers were killed. Lynch was later rescued from an Iraqi hospital by special forces.

“If kids like Jessica Lynch were going into battle, I felt I had to do my part,” says Dugan. He re-enlisted and found himself in Mosul as part of the 416th Civil Affairs unit and served as a political officer and public administration officer for the US Embassy. While it may sound like a cushy assignment, it was anything but. His job was reaching “the hearts and minds of the local people,” along with other lawyers, doctors, nurses, engineers and others who used their civilian skills to help the Iraqis get themselves and their communities back on their feet.

“My time in Iraq was super rewarding and horrific,” he says. He described himself as “the guy with the weapon, the body armor, and the Hawaiian shirt” who worked as a liaison between the US State Department and military and local governments and with individual groups, such as the women he helped, through a women’s empowerment program launched with US seed money, to set up small businesses. Many of the women were initially frightened. Working with Americans could have made them a target. “But they were some super brave women who persevered,” says Dugan.

“I was blessed to work with a lot of great people—Sunni, Shia, Christian, Turkomon and they were like the rest of us,” he says. “All they want is security and safety for their families.”

Today, on his wrist, he wears a bracelet with the names of two people he came to admire during his Iraq stint: One, an Irish-American, Lt. Col Mark Patrick Phelan, 44, of Green Lane, who served in his unit and was killed in the explosion of an IED in Mosul; the other, a Sunni Iraqi, Osama Kashmouli, a local official he worked with whom he described as “an Iraqi patriot who was trying to do right” and who was assassinated.

In 2005, Dugan received a Direct Commission to US Army JAG, and was deployed to Bagram, Afghanistan in 2006. He served in a military legal capacity for the 82nd Airborne and the 10th Mountain Division as the Chief of Legal Assistance and Federal Claims Commission. He received many medals and honors for his work.

While waiting for release from active duty in 2007, he was appointed judge of the Philadelphia Municipal Court by then PA Gov. Ed Rendell. In 2008, Dugan says, he read about a special veterans court in Buffalo, NY, that took a veterans’ whole life—service record, injuries both physical and mental, re-entry issues with family, friends, and employers, and drug problems traced to their service—into account when meting out justice.

“It’s not meant to give them a slap on the wrist,” he says. “In my court, we actually hold veterans to a higher standard of behavior. But I may insist they go to therapy instead of serving time. I tell them I want them to get back to the person they were when they were in the service.’

Veteran mentors and representatives from the Veterans Administration and other vet groups are in his courtroom. Vets learn before they leave what services they're eligible for and can make appointments then and there. "We connect them with the benefits they've already earned through their service," he says.

A vet who agrees to work on his or her problems is asked to sign a contract committing to going to therapy, drug rehab, or another therapeutic program such as Shamrock Reins, a nonprofit equine therapy organization in Pipersville that provides mental health professionals, therapeutic riding instructors--and horses, of course-- to veterans in an innovative, evidence-based therapy program.

It all seems to be working. "The recividism rate is under 10 percent in our court," says Dugan. It's so successful, Dugan would like to expand this holistic "treatment court" approach throughout the court system. "We're not there yet," he says.

Outside the courtroom, Judge Dugan is a diehard Eagles fan. In fact, an Eagles poster is the first thing you see when you walk into his office. "I love all the Philly teams," he says. In 1974 when the Flyers won the Stanley Cup, he says his mother kept him out of school for the celebration. "She wrote me a note for school that said I had Flyers' fever." He laughs.

He and his wife, Nancy, a retired police officer, put together a Brady Bunch family 12 years ago. "We each contributed three," he laughed. They also have six grandchildren. "We don't use the term 'stepchildren' or 'stepgrandchildren,'" he says. "They're all ours."