

Seaside Manner

After spending weekdays advising clients, Kevin Patrick McVerry devotes his weekends to helping people as a lifeguard at Los Angeles County beaches.

BY DIANE TAYLOR

Although Kevin Patrick McVerry relishes his recent courtroom victory on behalf of the City of Desert Hot Springs, where he was able to convince the jury to award only \$1 against his client, his most gratifying accomplishments have nothing to do with the legal profession. Rather, McVerry is part of a unique group of full-time professionals who find that their weekend jobs as ocean lifeguards are often more rewarding than their chosen vocations.

McVerry, twice named an All-American swimmer by the National Collegiate Athletic Association, has worked as an ocean lifeguard since 1973, when he was a student at California State University, Northridge. Since that time, McVerry has spent most of his weekends and a few summers lifeguarding, both at Santa Monica Beach and Zuma Beach in Malibu.

"Lifeguarding is remarkably different from the work that I do," says McVerry. "At the end of most days in the office I've moved a lot of paper — drafted motions, letters, discovery — but I can't say that I've concluded anything."

"However, at the end of a day lifeguarding, I can say that today, I made three rescues, reunited two kids with their families, patched up an injury or even just tended to a cut on a finger," he continues. "I find that extremely satisfying."

Not that McVerry doesn't enjoy lawyering. After 22 years of practicing in both the civil and criminal arena, McVerry, 46, says pursuing a legal career has "worked well for me."

Law school, however, was not an inevitable choice.

As a child McVerry had absolutely no affinity for the legal profession, but a chance encounter later precipitated his decision to become an attorney. At 15, he met plaintiffs' lawyer Joseph G. Hurley at the Boys' Club of North Hollywood. Hurley, then a partner at Hurley, Grassini & Wrinkle and later the vice-president of the State Bar of California, approached McVerry and some other boys and asked them if they wanted to become lawyers. McVerry's negative response did not deter Hurley, who recruited him and a group of other boys to work as summer law clerks.

At the personal injury firm, McVerry

was assigned typical clerking tasks, such as updating legal reference books, filing and picking up records. However, Hurley also discussed his cases with the clerks and brought them to court, as well as to meetings with experts.

"I remember going out one day with Hurley and meeting with a handwriting expert who had worked on the Lindbergh baby kidnapping case," says McVerry. "When I think about it now, I

PROFILE

Kevin Patrick McVerry

Law School: Columbus School of Law of the Catholic University of America, 1977

Career Highlights: Ventura County district attorney's office, 1979-1982; Cohen, England & Whitfield, 1982-1985; Graves, Roberson & Bourassa, 1985-present

Types of Cases: Product liability, premises liability, personal injury, Federal Fair Housing Act litigation

can't believe it. But at the time, it seemed natural that he would take me to these places and the people would give me their time. I look at it now and realize how really fortunate I was to have someone like that."

Hurley also encouraged McVerry to attend his "law club," an informal group of people who gathered to talk about law and how it influenced everyone's daily lives. "To a great extent, Hurley was the reason I became a lawyer," says McVerry. "It was wonderful to see how he helped people. They would come to him with life-affecting cases, and he would look at their problems and be able to set them straight."

After working a couple of summers at Hurley, Grassini & Wrinkle, McVerry entered CSU Northridge. In 1974, he graduated cum laude with a bachelor's degree in history. To this day, McVerry maintains an avid interest in history, especially the period of American history from 1940 to the present. At home, he keeps a library devoted largely to biography-oriented history books, which he reads during his spare time.

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When it came time to elect a graduate program, McVerry followed Hurley's example and enrolled in law school. He obtained his J.D. from Washington, D.C.'s Columbus School of Law, a division of the Catholic University of America, in 1977. The summer between his second and third years, McVerry continued to work at Hurley's firm as a law clerk.

After graduating from law school, McVerry spent his first year as a lawyer clerking for U.S. District Judge A. Andrew Hawk. "At the federal level, I had the opportunity to observe the very best lawyers working at their highest levels, which was tremendous," McVerry says. "Plus, Judge Hawk enjoyed interacting with the law clerks. Instead of just having us write memos, he would always discuss each case with us, and we would explore the issues together. It was a great year."

After completing his clerkship, McVerry moved to Blecher & Collins, a Los Angeles antitrust firm. He was there for only six months. "The attorneys at Blecher & Collins were wonderful people, but after working there for a short time, I realized that I couldn't spend my life doing antitrust cases," says McVerry. "I looked at the lawyers at that firm who had been practicing for 10 to 12 years and realized that they had never tried a case. I knew then that I wasn't going to stay there for long."

In March 1979, McVerry moved to the Ventura County district attorney's office. Within two weeks, McVerry was doing what he loved best — trying cases. As a deputy district attorney, McVerry tried DUIs, assault and battery cases, burglaries and homicides. "I really enjoyed working at the district attorney's office," McVerry says. "There was a sense that we were all working on the side of truth, justice and the American way — or on behalf of what my partner calls the 'white horse.'"

After three years, McVerry switched back to private practice by joining Cohen, England & Whitfield in Oxnard. He tried several cases against the firm while at the district attorney's office and was very impressed with the lawyers' skills. In addition to the firm's criminal cases, McVerry handled some business litigation, construction defect and banking cases.

Three years later, McVerry moved once again, to Graves & Roberson in Thousand Oaks. Even though he liked

working at Cohen England, he had only tried three to four cases in three years. "There was a lot of pretrial and prep work, but not a lot of trial work," he says.

McVerry has remained at the firm, now called Graves, Roberson & Bourassa, for 14 years. He made partner eight years ago and is one of three attorneys in the civil litigation department. The other attorneys at the firm specialize in workers' compensation and retirement matters.

McVerry's caseload at the firm includes product liability, premises liability, personal injury and Fair Housing Act matters. His biggest clients are corporations such as Johnson Controls, a manufacturing company; Astec, a road construction firm; and various municipalities, such as the city of Desert Hot Springs.

"I enjoy working at the firm, because I have the opportunity to try a lot of cases," McVerry says. "And I like the low-key, friendly, casual atmosphere that the firm encourages."

It's not surprising that the firm is a good fit for McVerry, since his own style of lawyering has been described as "mild-mannered" and "extremely civil." In fact, it is his old mentor Hurley, now a sole practitioner, who characterized McVerry that way.

"Kevin is a genuinely nice man in a profession where many people are afraid to be nice," Hurley says. "He realizes that the practice of law is more of an art than a science, and is able to diffuse the conditions of anxiety that are often present in trial work. Despite his mild manner, however, Kevin has some great internal strengths. If you ever need a law partner or a lawyer, you could find no one better than Kevin."

James C. Fedalen, a partner at Calabasas' Sabo & Green, which represents the city of Desert Hot Springs in its litigation matters, echoes Hurley's assessment. "Kevin is low-keyed, and yet he can be very intense in the courtroom," he says. "He's diligent, perceptive, very bright and has the ability to comprehend and utilize the facts of a case to his client's best advantage. Above all, he's a gentleman in the way that he practices and provides a great example of how attorneys should conduct themselves."

McVerry, who has been married for over 22 years to his wife Anna, has two daughters, Catherine, 17, and Margaret, 15. Both girls were adopted from Korea when they were 2 years old. On weekends, McVerry often takes them with him to the beach while he lifeguards, or his wife brings them later in the day. Afterward, the family usually dines together in Malibu, either at a restaurant or with a bucket of chicken on the beach.