Steve Rovig, KCBA’s personable president for 2014–15, is still running hard. No, not for any office — his election as KCBA president is officially behind him. I mean good, old-fashioned, long-distance running — the monotonous, unrelenting, one-foot-in-front-of-the-other kind of punishment (um, exercise) that reflects Rovig’s own determined and tireless nature.

A proud native son of the Big Sky Country, Rovig has Montana roots that go back to the late 19th Century. His grandparents were schoolteachers, who as a young married couple made their way west from Iowa to teach in a one-room, Montana schoolhouse. Rovig’s father was a small-businessman in Kalispell and his mother was a nurse. Rovig and his three siblings grew up there, in the heart of northwest Montana’s Flathead Valley, a region that he revisits often with abiding affection.

Though some of us dream of becoming an attorney from childhood on, others like Rovig never even knew a lawyer growing up. He had no idea what lawyers did. But of course, most every kid does visit his local doctor.

So, an inspiring young Steve Rovig headed off to college at Montana State in Bozeman with ambitions of a career in medicine. Sobering encounters with a couple of med school prerequisites ultimately turned him into a much happier history major. A big man on campus, Rovig was elected student body president in his senior year, graduating with highest honors in 1975, but still with no definite career plans.

Rovig still claims that the best job he ever had was during college — his summer work as a boat captain in Glacier National Park. Be that as it may, Rovig landed an enviable job fresh out of Montana State that would change the course of his life. First-term U.S. Rep. Max Baucus hired him as a district representative — the staffer back home who tours a congressional district to meet with constituents regarding their concerns and requests.

This kind of grassroots staff work is challenging in a congressional district of any size, but it’s far more daunting in Montana. In 1975, there were but two congressional seats statewide (reduced to one after 1990), with the Montana First District essentially covering the western half of the vast state. So it was that Rovig spent a year crisscrossing the wide open spaces of western Montana in a Winnebago van, meeting the locals at country stores and post offices on behalf of Rep. Baucus, listening and responding to their needs.

Rovig’s natural charm, diplomatic bent, tireless work ethic and dependability all came to the fore that year. The congressman was impressed enough to hire the 23-year-old Rovig to manage his congressional re-election campaign in 1976. On election night, the congressman was touched that 23-year-old Rovig would throw in a $100 bet that he would win.

The congressman was right, and Rovig won. On August 13, 1976, Baucus announced that he had won the re-election to Congress with a whopping 66 percent of the vote.

Baucus trained together, and Rovig ran his first marathon in 1982 in Helena, along with the senator. How did Rovig do that day? “I finished,” he says.

Three years in D.C. were enough and Rovig was more than ready to leave the Beltway rat race behind and begin a new life practicing law. He wanted to live in a western city and had three good friends in Seattle, so he loaded up his Dodge Omni and headed for the Pacific Northwest. He landed at the Hillis Clark firm in December 1983, where he has risen to become a leading real estate attorney in our region.

His practice involves all aspects of complex property transactions and financing, and his peers have repeatedly recognized him as a Washington Super Lawyer. Though his real estate expertise is rightly prized in the Hillis firm, Rovig is most celebrated by lawyers and staff as the firm’s long-standing “Party Czar for Life,” planning the annual firm retreat, holiday party and other special occasions, and gracing each with his particular blend of merriment, inventiveness and tireless attention to detail. The guy knows how to throw a party.

Rovig’s second career as a lawyer-volunteer was prompted by the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. He and his longtime partner (now husband), Brian Gildens, had lost too many friends to the ravages of the epidemic. Wanting to do something positive in the face of then-hopeless odds, Rovig began working with KCBA’s Volunteer Attorneys for People with AIDS (VAPWA) program, advising clients on real estate, estate planning and other matters.

He also became active in the Chicken Soup Brigade, an inspiring, grassroots organization that,
without governmental support, delivered daily food and comfort to hundreds of people living with AIDS. Rovig ultimately became president of the organization and also co-chaired a capital campaign to fund and construct a commercial kitchen that over the years has provided thousands of meals for those living with AIDS and other chronic diseases.

By the late 1980s, Rovig had become chair of KCBA’s Pro Bono Committee, addressing the entire spectrum of low-income clients’ needs in our community, while himself continuing to provide pro bono legal services. A decade later, Rovig was asked to become a trustee of the King County Bar Foundation, the funding cornerstone of KCBA’s pro bono and diversity efforts.

The Foundation’s principal fund-raising event in those days was a modest annual luncheon that brought out a few hundred supporters at most. The board wanted to kick the fundraising effort up a notch, and at a KCBF trustees’ meeting Rovig proposed transforming the luncheon into a more ambitious breakfast fundraiser. He is particularly proud of rebranding the event as the catchy “Breakfast With Champions,” a brainstorm that came to him where so many of us find good ideas — in the shower.

After dutifully (and prudently) clearing the name with General Mills, KCBF was off and running with its spectacularly successful, new fundraiser, one that has become the largest annual gathering of attorneys in the state, as lawyers and “citizens” alike come to breakfast to support the crucial diversity and pro bono work of the King County bar.

Following his term as KCBF president in 2001–02, Rovig was recruited for a new round of board service, this time with KCBA. He has served successively as a KCBA trustee, treasurer, second vice president and first vice president, before ascending this month to the giddy heights of untrammelled power vested in the KCBA presidency.

**Richard Wilson is of counsel at Hillis Clark Martin & Peterson, where he has practiced land use law since 1976. He has been Steve Rovig’s friend and colleague for more than 30 years.**

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