



1955

CHS Bio

Jim McDermott

Law Man



After a Summer spent mowing grass for the Board of Education (do you remember the heat wave of August, 1956), I entered Princeton in the Fall of that year. Because I had largely “skated” through Central, I was unprepared for Princeton’s academic rigor (for which I had only myself to blame). By the second semester of my sophomore year, I managed to be on both academic and chapel probation. Somehow I turned the corner in my junior year and, much to my astonishment, ended up graduating *magna cum laude* in English literature.

While at Princeton, I rowed as a member of the lightweight crew. This proved as valued a part of my undergraduate experience as the academics. And, as a junior and senior, I took my meals at Colonial Club (Princeton’s upper-class eating clubs were counterparts of fraternities). Jack Siggins was a clubmate, as were Arch Edwards and Dick Freese from classes ahead of us at Central.

Ideally, I would have pursued a Ph.D. in the humanities. But practically, and with the heritage of three generations of lawyers before me, I succumbed and went to law school. My J.D. degree was awarded by Michigan Law School in 1963. While at Michigan, I was a member of the Order of the Coif (a scholastic legal honors society) and The Barristers’ Society (a fraternal organization) and served on the senior staff of the *Michigan Law Review*.

I spent my entire career practicing law with the firm of Barnes & Thornburg in Indianapolis. I was drawn to the firm by the extraordinary collection of individuals it then comprised. As a group, they were among the most intellectually and professionally challenging and civically, politically and culturally motivated folks with whom I’ve been privileged to associate. I was fortunate to have had two of them as my mentors.

The firm had 26 lawyers when I arrived in 1963 and underwent a tenfold expansion by the time I finally retired in 1995. I was admitted to partnership in 1970. As a partner, I became active in firm management,

servicing during my tenure on the management, executive and compensation committees, as a departmental and practice group Chair and as Chair of the firm's Professional Responsibility Committee.

But the fulfilling part of my work experience was being a trial lawyer. I handled complex commercial litigation, dealing largely with finance, securities, corporate governance and change of control issues, generally as lead counsel. I tried cases in both state and federal trial courts, as well as handling appeals taken to federal and state appellate tribunals. There were great moments. And I was fortunate in having the help and companionship of a number of outstandingly bright and capable colleagues to whom I owe a large measure of the credit for such success as I have enjoyed. But, as I neared the end of my legal career, I became dissatisfied with the increasing but utterly pointless contentiousness that was becoming fashionable among litigators and with the unwillingness or unpreparedness of some judges to grapple with complicated facts.

Our lawyers were expected to be civically involved in the Indianapolis community. My contributions towards this end included organizing The Festival Music Society (which produced Summer concerts of Baroque music) and The Penrod Society (essentially a male Junior League). I also became involved with The Indiana Sports Corporation, a sponsor of national and international amateur athletic competitions in Indianapolis, which was instrumental in Indianapolis' "renaissance" in the '80's. As a consequence of this involvement, I served as Chair of the local organizing committee for three national championship regattas of the United States Rowing Association and as Commissioner responsible for the rowing competition at the 1987 Pan American Games, thus vicariously returning to an interest of my youth.

While practicing law, I didn't have a great deal of time for recreational activities. But in my '40's I did take the mountaineering course at the Colorado Outward Bound School and participated thereafter in several climbs in Mexico and Peru. My clumsiness has to have been legendary and I am grateful to the climb leaders who cheerfully tolerated it without mishap. At a considerably less challenging level, I now take weekly hikes up into and along the so-called "Blue Wall" that runs just several miles to the Northwest of our present home in Tryon, North Carolina.

(Down for more)

Litigation proved a financially rewarding but taxing career. I was fortunate to accumulate a sufficient competence to enable me to begin retirement at 55 and complete my withdrawal from the practice in 1995.

Since my retirement, I have pursued a number of academic and recreational interests, principally self-study of mathematics, cabinetmaking and horseback riding. Recently, I've also been dabbling in some analytic philosophy and trying to puzzle through some dauntingly difficult contemporary poetry. (I'm still an undergraduate at heart.) And I'm now struggling to figure out how to avoid incinerating artisan breads in my newly constructed wood-fired, masonry oven.

After moving to Tryon, I also involved myself in several volunteer activities, including service as a director and an officer of FENCE, an equestrian and nature facility that is the centerpiece of this horse-oriented community, and as a member of the Finance Committee of the Polk County Community Foundation. I have also served as a member of our county zoning board since 2000 (and as its Chair during the past several years).

I am married to Renée R. McDermott (who was one of my former law partners). I confess a weakness for smart and strong-willed women. I have two children from an earlier marriage, and three grandchildren upon whom I dote.

Although raised in a staunchly Republican family, I have been, by choice, a liberal Democrat throughout my adult life.

I haven't found religion's claims convincing since the sixth grade and thus have no religious affiliations. I'm in sympathy with what someone else once said: "I'm an agnostic; I'd be an atheist if it weren't for Mozart."

I abide.

(Jim advises that he will be unable to attend our reunion, however you may contact him at jmcdermott@alltel.net , 845 Fox Run Lane, Tryon, NC 28782, phone (828) 859-6131)