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Profile



By Melissa Huelsman

Ivan Orton was one of the first attorneys I met when I moved to Seattle, and now, years later, I have yet to meet another attorney who so perfectly epitomizes the stereotypical transplant to Seattle.

Ivan is generally liberal in his views, eschews business attire whenever possible, knows more than I ever will about computers and computer technology, and plays soccer on a co-ed team weekly. Just based on this short description, is there anyone who would dispute my claim that Ivan is fervently embracing the Seattle lifestyle? If I told you that Ivan uses his significant legal skills every day to protect consumers, I'll bet you would agree that this too fits with the profile of the stereotypical Seattleite. But I'm also willing to bet that, unless you already know Ivan and his work, you would be surprised to learn that Ivan serves the public each and every day through his work at the King County Prosecutor's Office as a Senior Attorney in the Fraud Division. Where else but in Seattle would the attorney wearing shorts and sandals to work, no matter what the weather, be the prosecutor?

Ivan and his knees, which are always on prominent display in his office, grew up throughout the South and Midwest before his family, headed by his father, a Nazarene minister, finally settled in a small town in Northwest Oklahoma when Ivan was in the fourth grade.

Consistent with his family's early years of movement, Ivan attended eighth grade in Minnesota before they moved back to Oklahoma following the death of his father. However, while in Minnesota, Ivan raised money with friends for a camping trip that he was unwilling to forego. So Ivan bought a motor scooter and convinced his mother that it was a perfectly reasonable thing for him to ride it the 600 miles from Oklahoma to Minnesota to go on the camping trip. Years later, when he questioned his mother about the wisdom of permitting him to make such a trip, she explained that he always seemed responsible, so she let him go.

When Ivan graduated from high school in 1966 he was the state debate champ and had participated in a dramatic duet that won him some acclaim. Ivan had discovered an interest in the law during a business law class in high school and was persuaded not to pursue a career in medicine because he was attracted to the logic of law (of course, this perception of logic in the law faded with education, but, thank goodness for the legal profession, Ivan stuck with it even after discovering the law's frequent illogic).

Ivan attended college at Northwest Oklahoma State College. He obtained a Bachelor's Degree in political science with a minor in economics, and was voted outstanding senior by the faculty. This, in spite of the fact that he complained vociferously about the school's president on a regular basis. Ivan was a member of the debate team in college and as a result, obtained a fellowship at the University of Texas at Austin working as a teaching assistant in the political science department.

It was in Austin that the Ivan of today first appeared. He grew his hair and a mustache, and began to take computer classes after being exposed to the use of computers at the school.

Even though he loved teaching, Ivan LSAT in 1972. He received good enough scores to apply to top tier schools. He remembers waiting for the replies and receiving a thick packet from Harvard one day in the mail.

However, at the same time, Ivan heard about a fellowship available from the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City for social science research. Ivan applied thinking that he would never get the position. Of course, he was awarded the fellowship and, with his new wife and their two cocker spaniels, he moved to New York City to work on game theory matrixes.

Ivan spent a fabulous year in New York and produced a computer simulation of plea-bargaining for his dissertation. But his professors did not appreciate his paper and he was working on revisions when he applied again to Harvard and was accepted. He was disillusioned by the process of grant selection and decided to get back on track towards law school. The dissertation remains unfinished and awaiting the recommended revisions.

Ivan entered Harvard in 1974, when the Paper Chase premiered on T.V. and One L had just been published. He had a positive reaction to law school and made a lot of friends. Having been through numerous educational experiences, Ivan was impressed by the level of discussions at law school and by the quality of his education. He was taught civil procedure by Arthur Miller and, even though he always made a great effort to be prepared, he eventually realized that he would never get ahead of his professor. It was enlightening and challenging, and caused him to strive to do his best throughout law school. Ivan was also propelled to excel by his classmate and friend Barney Frank, who worked so hard he made all of his classmates' efforts seem smaller.

Ivan was on law review at Harvard, but found his greatest joy by taking part in stage productions. It began with a bit part in the first year, a lead role during second year, and, by his third year, he was co-writing and directing the production.

It was during these productions that Ivan met his second wife who auditioned. During his first and second year externships he worked for a criminal lawyer and then for a Wall Street firm and insurance defense firm. During his third year, his roommate Mike Kipling saw notices regarding legal jobs with the Federal Trade Commission Consumer Protection Division and suggested they apply. Ivan agreed to apply, along with Mike and their other roommate, and they were all hired.

So in late May of 1977, Ivan headed out for Seattle.

While with the FTC, Ivan brought cases regarding the repossession practices of the big three automakers and proposed new rules regarding car leasing. He also brought many cases regarding debt collection processes and loved doing this sort of work. However, under the Reagan Administration, considerably fewer consumer cases were being brought so Ivan left in 1982 after he saw a notice regarding a job with the King County Prosecutor's Office in the Fraud Division. Even though he had no trial experience, Ivan conducted his first trial within four weeks of taking the job. And in this new job, Ivan found his calling and the career that would span the next two decades.

Even though the rest of the country was just beginning to awaken to the use of computers to commit fraud, Ivan began looking at these types of cases in the early 80's. It began with an inquiry about a possible cyber-crime by Microsoft in 1983 that renewed his interest in computers. There was a UW Professor who lost data regarding the Mars probe from his computer and Ivan was able to bring charges against a defendant for malicious mischief. Ivan was instrumental in drafting legislation for computer trespass statutes and continues to provide input on computer crime statutes.

However, the majority of Ivan's work at the Prosecutor's Office involves financial crime. He has handled a large mortgage investment case that involved 600 loan transactions, ten million dollars in losses and 100,000 pages of documents. Ivan prosecutes securities fraud cases and those involving financial abuse of the elderly.

I got to know Ivan while doing volunteer work on a large magazine subscription fraud case involving victims from across the country. Most of his work involves traditional fraud cases and the view from most people involved in these cases is that there is no one who does better work in this area than Ivan.

But he also maintains his passion for computers by assisting police with computer searches whenever asked, and is working to get better laws regarding Internet harassment.

Colleagues describe him as extremely bright and knowledgeable, and most importantly to other professionals, he is always willing to assist others.

Retired Judge Larry Jordan says that the people of the Washington are lucky to have Ivan working on their behalf, and emphasizes that Ivan is tenacious but reasonable and pragmatic. All necessary traits for a successful prosecutor.

Other professionals who work with Ivan especially appreciate his wit and sense of humor, and of course, his knees. In fact, a group of information security professionals with whom Ivan works regularly made it one of their objectives to obtain a picture of him wearing pants in the courtroom because they assume that he must be required to wear them there, but no one has yet accomplished the mission. I have never seen him in pants, but I have seen a sports jacket hanging in his office. It may be there for display purposes only, but frankly, so long as Ivan continues his important work on behalf of consumers throughout the state, I don't think it matters what he wears to court. I just want him to keep on doing what he does best.

Melissa Huelsman practices in the areas of fraud litigation and investigation.

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