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Sandy Wells: Innerviews

■ 'The kids call me "Ranger Rick"'

He's a prominent Charleston lawyer with Kay Casto & Chaney, a labor and employment specialist listed in the Best Lawyers in America.

In a suit and tie, sitting behind his desk in a plush office overlooking the city, he looks the part. Businesslike. Refined. Erudite.

But Steve Weber has his casual side. Forget the wingtips. Would you believe clodhoppers?

The respected 66-year-old lawyer harbors an adventuresome love of the outdoors. When his nose isn't in a law book, he could be hut-to-hut skiing in Colorado or off on a frigid wolf-watching tour through Yellowstone Park.

When he isn't practicing law or hiking the Appalachian Trail, he could be in a boardroom contributing his considerable insight to one of three pet organizations — Goodwill Industries, the Kanawha County Health Department and the Kanawha Dental Health Council. He served two three-year terms on the national Goodwill Industries board in the 1970s.

On Saturday, he will be honored for those civic services as the recipient of the Mario Palumbo Award at the Mario Palumbo ALS Research Gala at Berry Hills Country Club.

"I grew up in Berkeley Springs up in Morgan County. My mother was a stay-at-home mom. My dad was the town barber. I started shining shoes in the barbershop when I was 10. That was my Saturday work. I made 10 cents a shine. Big money.

"I was in Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. A good friend owned a big farm and we'd go camping and fishing. I went small-game hunting with my dad. I had a great childhood.

"I thought for a while that I wanted to get in the medical field, but there are so many demands on you in the medical profession that you don't have a life unless you are very fortunate. My wife is a dentist. She has been able to handle things so she has this home thing and the professional thing.

"I went to Mount St. Mary's College in Maryland, then spent a year in dental school at WVU. I thought I'd give it a try. I enjoyed the intellectual challenge, but I was advised by one of my professors that I probably would be better off somewhere else because my manual skills really weren't what you would need to be a dentist. I finally faced up to that.

"I went directly from there to law school at WVU. Back when I went to law school, the professor lectured, and you took notes, and at the end of the course, you took the exam. Now the thrust is geared more to practical aspects — interviewing clients, appearing in court, opportunities to do the things you do in your professional life.

"After law school, I got a direct commission in Air Force JAG [judge advocate general's department]. My wife and I married my third year. I finished my hitch at Richards-Gebaur, about 20 miles from Kansas City, and I got my master's degree out there. Amy and I both wanted to come back to West Virginia. I've been here since 1970.

"I came immediately to this firm. In those days, you got passed around to different areas until you fell into something you liked. Frank Taylor was one of our partners, and he had just gotten out of the state Senate and was way behind on his practice. I had more maturity than the average person coming in because of my military service, and he decided I would work with him to get him out of this backlog. Then tragically, a couple of years later, Frank was killed in an automobile accident. I was working then in the labor law area with Frank, so I took over that aspect of it. And that evolved into employment law.

"When I started, there was no such thing as employment law. There were no sexual harassment claims. The things we have now, the Human Rights Act, Pregnancy Act, the Equal Wage Act, none of that existed.

"We represented a lot of contractors through the labor law connection. This was back in the first energy crisis where a bunch of contractors came in to try to mine coal. In three years, they were in Chapter 11, and we represented a lot of them, and a lot of equipment financiers, so employment law became a bigger item. That's 90 percent of what I do these

days.

"I went to my partners a few years ago and said I wanted to kick back a little and have two or three months a year to travel. I don't look at retiring like never doing anything. It's more a shifting of focus, perhaps going to of-counsel status so you are here as a resource for the younger lawyers.

"Charleston certainly has plenty of lawyers. Charleston is a microcosm of Washington, D.C., where everybody goes there to get experience in government and the theory is they are going to go back home and practice, but they never go back home. They all just stay right here.

"Part of it is the influx of out-of-state firms. Charleston unfortunately has the reputation of being sort of a litigation petri dish. We have very favorable juries, elected judges who are looked upon as being very plaintiff-favorable. The Supreme Court unfortunately has a terrible reputation of being very plaintiff-slanted, so all that generates interest in litigation here, and that's why we have that influx.

"My wife and I went to Australia and New Zealand and Tasmania and Italy. My sons and I have been kayaking in Alaska. My younger son and I went kayaking in Costa Rica. And I've hiked a chunk of the Appalachian Trail.

"I cross-country skied through Yellowstone Park in the dead of winter at 17 below zero on a wolf-watching tour. It wasn't one of my more brilliant escapades at 17 below, but it did tend to keep you moving. And I've gone hut-to-hut skiing in Colorado.

"A couple of years ago, a friend and I ran away from home. We left in his 1992 Ford Taurus with 200,000 miles on it and drove up the Alaskan Highway to Fairbanks and down to Anchorage and Seward. Then we sold the car and flew to Juneau and caught the Alaskan ferry to Bellingham, Washington. We rented a car there and went up to Canada and drove down to Mount Hood and saw it before it exploded.

"Anybody who gets to Alaska would have an affinity for it. It's beautiful and unique and unfortunately, it's disappearing.

"The kids call me 'Ranger Rick' because of the things I did when they were growing up, camping and canoeing, trying to get them into things like that. I'd go to the soccer games and they'd say, 'Here comes Ranger Rick,' because I'd have on clunky boots and a big hat, so the name stuck.

"When Katrina hit, I had a camping trip planned to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. My friend called and said his church had collected about 10,000 pounds of food and supplies. He said we could take the trailer to Mississippi and then start the camping trip. We had four flat tires on the way, so it was quite a trip. We ended up spending a week down there helping people whose homes had flooded. It was a very ugly scene. You saw the stuff on TV, but that did not bring it home like being there and seeing the impact on those folks.

"I'm being honored at the ALS thing for my work with three organizations — Goodwill, the Kanawha-Charleston Board of Health and the Dental Health Council. Ironically, in 40 years of law practice, I've been in horribly contentious matters on behalf of clients, and I've never been sued and never had a complaint made against me, but because of my membership in those three charitable organizations, for which I have not gotten one thin dime, I have been sued in each of those three cases. You know what they say about no deed going unpunished.

"I've been very fortunate in my life. There's an old saying that you need three things to be happy: someone to love, something interesting to do and something to look forward to. I've had all of those things.

"Most of the things I wanted to do, I have done. One thing I would like to do sometime is take a motorcycle trip to Alaska, and of course, my wife is dead set against it, so that may be a dream I never achieve."

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