CARBONDALE—Although John C. Ryan grew up in the Illinois city of Jacksonville, he is just as comfortable on a mountain as he is on the prairie. He attended a Jesuit high school in Prairie du Chien, Wis., where the climate and topography were different, and he learned to ski.

Ryan, 62, of Feirich/Mager/Green/Ryan, continues down the slopes today. His love of skiing influenced his decision to attend college at the University of Denver, where he arranged his class schedule to allow long weekends at a cousin’s place in Aspen.

He chuckles about his trips spent there with college friends. “I think we set a record for the number of people who could fit overnight in a one-bedroom condominium.”

Ryan’s father was a lawyer, a state’s attorney and a judge, so the family business seemed nearly inevitable. “I almost grew up in a courthouse,” says Ryan. “I would walk home from school and stop at the courthouse till Dad got ready to go home. It was an old courthouse built in 1865, and I probably accessed areas I wasn’t supposed to.”

In college, Ryan focused on the liberal arts, majored in English literature and wrote extensively. He knew writing would be important in law school.

The major has stayed with him. When he talks with associates about legal writing, he tells them, “When it comes to legal documents, write like Hemingway, not like Faulkner.”

In the days of Vietnam, Ryan needed to maintain good grades to keep his student deferment. As number three in the lottery, he thought he might be drafted after senior year. But when President Nixon ended the draft that spring, he went full speed ahead to law school at Southern Illinois University Law School as a member of its charter class.

“It was the best thing that ever happened to me,” Ryan says. “As a small class, we had a unique opportunity to get to know our faculty socially. We were a diverse group that included military veterans, older students and people like me directly from undergraduate school. We didn’t know what we were getting into, as we had no students in the years ahead of us to help guide us. We had a close class, and two of my best friends today were roommates from law school.”

Before Ryan’s 1L year, Illinois was the only law school in the state outside of Chicago. The legislature thought southern Illinois was underserved, and statistics proved the point.

When Ryan joined the Jackson County Bar Association, there were 25 attorneys. Now the number exceeds 200.

Ryan found a job directly out of law school with a longtime, premier defense firm. “There were jobs in many practice areas and throughout the state,” he says. “Unlike today, no one had any difficulty finding a job.

“I joined the firm shortly after we merged with John C. Feirich & Associates. It startled the local legal community because we had a ‘huge’ law firm of six attorneys,” he laughs. “Forty years later we have 16 lawyers plus

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The firm’s comptroller recently found a cancelled check for two weeks pay from 1977 which was $384 dollars. “Things have changed,” he says.

Richard Feirich gave the firm a strong reputation in insurance defense, Ryan says. Another key person who taught Ryan how to be a trial lawyer was Paul Schoen, who left the firm to go into business with a client.

Lucky Medical Malpractice Start

“Almost by accident, Green asked me to help with a medical malpractice defense case. I fell in love with the work. The complexity of the issues and the science you had to learn were a step above the automobile accident cases or premises liability cases I had been doing. Every case had some different medical or legal issue and it was never repetitive.”

Currently, about three-quarters of Ryan’s cases involve medical malpractice. He attributes some of his love of his work to the added influence of his wife, Marsha. She is a general surgeon, but they met in 1983 when she was attending law school. They married in 1985.

“That really started my medical/legal education. She taught me so much about medicine, including that it is an art, not a science. Bad outcomes don’t mean someone always did something wrong.

“Meeting her colleagues helped me learn how difficult medicine can be, its challenges, and how each patient and case is unique. To say the least, it was great to have someone at home who could understand my cases.

“She took me to see surgeries and an autopsy. It opened doors into the medical community. I became personal and professional acquaintances with doctors in the community, and I could call them to get explanations. They were patient and helpful. It has given me a better understanding of medicine.”

Ryan represents hospitals and doctors. He considers himself lucky to work for Southern Illinois Healthcare Services, which operates three area hospitals and employs a growing number of physicians in hospitals and externally in practices.

“They have made this type of practice an absolute pleasure. We collaborate. We have quarterly meetings with all of the defense lawyers with topics pertinent to our practice. Southern Illinois Health, unlike a lot of insurance clients, values the advice and experience of their attorneys. They don’t have some faceless adjuster 300 miles away who doesn’t know the lawyers making decisions.

“Decisions are local, and they let us do what is best for the patient and the institution. They are a good corporate citizen for southern Illinois, and it is pleasure to do work for them.”

The balance of Ryan’s practice is defending a large client in major accident cases involving trucking companies and commercial businesses. Injury issues and extensive accident reconstruction science are common. “Southern Illinois is laced with interstates,” he says, “and there are often unfortunate accident cases.”

Ryan appreciates working with the team at Feirich/Mager/Green/Ryan. Its growth has been steady over the years, he says. The firm adds a lawyer every other year or so, depending on the firm’s dynamics. It has not had to cut back on attorneys.

The firm’s broad practice includes banking, real estate, probate, insurance defense, medical malpractice and a large practice in corporate work for a variety of southern Illinois companies. It also has a significant practice defending workers’ compensation cases, including black lung defense around the country.

“The growth of our business is about the needs of our clients. We have attorneys licensed in Kentucky and Missouri to serve our clients’ needs. At 16 lawyers, I think we are at a good size for our geographic location.”

As a senior lawyer, Ryan enjoys being surrounded with mostly younger attorneys with different areas of practice. He can exchange ideas, learn from them and assist them.

“People have asked me if I am thinking about retirement, but I enjoy what I do, and I enjoy the people I work with. It is more enjoyable than it ought to be! I am grateful to thoroughly enjoy my work.”

Trials Can Be Trying

Ryan describes trials as the hardest thing lawyers do. They are interesting but exhausting, he says, and each presents unique challenges and uncertainties.

“It makes you amp up and prepare carefully. I like it, but it is like a marathon, and I am glad when it is over.”

Ryan recites an oft-heard refrain in his field. Few cases go to trial. The bad ones aren’t pursued, and the good cases for plaintiffs settle. Mediation has changed the face of trial work, he says. It was a foreign concept when he started practicing law, but Ryan now mediates up to five cases a year.

“It is a good way to get difficult cases resolved. In retrospect, I am surprised it didn’t happen sooner. Judges, plaintiff lawyers, and insurance companies all like it. You prepare a statement of facts for the mediator—which may include not just the strengths but also the weaknesses of our case, which you would never present to a judge or opposing counsel in a trial.

Sometimes, Ryan says, a plaintiff may not fully comprehend the intricacies of some of the medical defense. At times, each side may have tunnel vision. “Every mother thinks their baby is the prettiest,” he says. “We all think that when we see our side of the case.

“The mediator can see both the strengths and weaknesses of the case from a neutral perspective. I have had people say that seeing both sides of the case has had an impact on their point of view. A skilled mediator can provide a fair result.”

Ryan enjoys life so much that his partners seem to think he is free to do what he likes. He says he will never run a marathon, but Ryan likes to golf, hunt, trout fish, snow ski, bike, hike, listen to music, go to the theater and read.

“I am not a person who wants to be in the office all of the time,” he says. “I enjoy my life so much outside of the office.”

Ryan takes off a little more time now than in the years when he used to forget to vacation. With his wife nearing retirement, they travel more. They recently vacationed without crowds or stress in South Carolina and relaxed by biking, golf, reading and fishing. They also visited Aspen for the music festival and to fly fish, bike and hike. “There is something beautiful about being at 8,000 feet in July where there is no heat or humidity,” he adds.

At work, Ryan says his law firm stresses community involvement. Because southern Illinois comprises many small communities, the firm has attorneys from Benton, Murphysboro, Carterville, Marion and Carbondale.

“We think it is a great way to get involved. The diversity of the people who live here in a university community is interesting. You get to know the local bankers and businesspeople. You get a higher percentage of involvement in a smaller community than in a larger city.”

Ryan has learned some important lessons about clients and the profession from his early days as an attorney. “Work hard, be diligent, be prepared and do what is best for the client and for the case. Don’t just do something because you can.

“Don’t file something because it is an option—do it because it is necessary and it will advance the case. Don’t waste the client’s money. Early on, I had a lot of small business clients, and they were very cost-conscious. It was impressed on me that you were working for that client. These were real people.

“The other lesson was to be civil, be polite, and try to get along. I have passed that advice along to the younger attorneys at the firm.

Have someone remember you for being civil, not for being someone who pushes lawyers and judges around. Get along with your adversary even if you disagree.

“I have fought hard battles with lawyers, but it never became personal. Shake hands no matter who won, and maybe go have a drink afterward. You will make more friends and have more fun.”

Joe Bleyer, an attorney from Marion, has known Ryan for almost 30 years. “We have worked on cases together, and we have been on the opposite side in cases. I have always found him to be an exceptional trial lawyer and a good person. And no matter which side we were on, we could still drink a beer together.”

“There is a bit less of that these days,” says Ryan. “Attorneys may be trying to impress senior lawyers or clients with how tough and aggressive they can be. There is an advantage to practicing in a community like ours. I have practiced in 30 counties and tried cases in half of them. You know people who live in these communities, and the practice is personal. In larger cities you may know less about your adversary or the judge.”

John Womick, an attorney with offices in Carbondale and Herrin, has also known Ryan for more than 30 years. He has only tried cases opposite Ryan, but he thinks highly of him.

“He is always thorough, polite and he tries to focus on the big issues. It has been a pleasure to work with him,” Womick says.

Ryan attests to the upside of the local practice environment. “You don’t have to ask for extensions here. You will get them. Here, you know you will have more than one encounter with your adversary down the road. Part of working in a smaller community is knowing this.

“Never burn a bridge. Someday you, too, will need a favor.”

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