

# President's Message



Martin Alvey

## *Sawmill roots important for workers' rights advocate*

*By Martin Alvey  
OTLA President & Guardian*

If one were to look at my family history, you might never guess that I would dedicate my life to representing injured workers. My great-great grandfather, Patrick Flanagan, was one of the first white settlers to the Coos Bay area in the early 1850s and eventually became a prosperous coal mine owner and banker. My maternal grandfather, Lloyd Kuni, was also a successful business owner of a sand, gravel and cement tile business in North Bend. But my long and winding path to becoming a workers' compensation lawyer had more to do with me being a native of Coos Bay than being descended from business owners.

I did not appreciate at the time that growing up in a mill town and working alongside union employees in the mills during my early life would provide huge benefits in my later career. Coos County in the 1960s and 70s was a tremendous place to grow up. The timber industry was in its heyday. Weyerhaeuser Company, with its large sawmill, plywood mill and export facilities in North Bend provided hundreds of union, family-wage jobs. Weyerhaeuser also ran an expansive logging operation on the tributaries of the Coos River from its Millicoma Tree Farm, again employing hundreds of union workers. Georgia-Pacific Corporation, Al Pierce Lumber

Company, Menasha Corporation, Coos Head Lumber Company were just a few of the other large employers in Coos Bay during that time. The International Longshore and Harbor Workers union ran the waterfront. Many of my classmates lived in families supported by these union, family-wage jobs.

After graduating from high school in 1978, I had the good fortune to be hired as a utility worker or "red-hat" in the Weyerhaeuser sawmill in North Bend. Working utility meant I was working all over the mill doing clean up work. I also

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filled in at various other jobs when there were absences, so I learned how to be a green chain puller (meaning I pulled "green" or unseasoned lumber from the conveyor machinery and sorted it in piles by dimension). By my sophomore year, the timber industry was heading toward decline. I was hired that summer by Georgia Pacific and spent most of the summer pulling green veneer at the GP plywood mill in Bunker Hill. This was by far the hardest job I ever held. I spent

the summer of my junior year as a night watchman/security officer patrolling Coos Head sawmill and plywood mill. By the time I graduated from Willamette University in 1982, a large portion of the union, family-wage jobs were gone. Weyerhaeuser was rapidly winding down its operations in the Coos Bay region.

### **An industry falls**

Watching the wood products industry head into decline fueled my interest in politics rather than law. In 1980, I volunteered for Ted Kulongoski's campaign for the United States Senate. When that venture came up short at the ballot box, I went to work for State Senator Kulongoski in his senate office as an intern for the 1981 legislative session. I worked on Kulongoski's campaign for governor during my senior year at Willamette and headed straight to work as a field staff person, as soon as I graduated. When that campaign ended with the re-election of Governor Vic Atiyeh, I was fortunate to be hired by House Speaker Grattan Kerans to work on the House floor staff.

At the end of that 1983 legislative session I was left with a decision concerning my future career plans. With my newly earned degree in History and Political Science, I narrowed it down to two choices — become a teacher like my father, or go to law school. I pondered that question long and hard and then applied to law school.

Although I've never looked back on my decision to become a lawyer, to this day I harbor some guilt over choosing not to follow in my father's footsteps.

### Rise of a new chapter

I was a blank slate when I got to law school. I had no idea what type of a lawyer I wanted to be. I was certain about one thing after my first year in law school, I wanted to go back to Coos Bay to work during the summer. I sent blind applications and resumés to almost every lawyer in the Coos Bay-North Bend area. Again, good fortune smiled on me.

I was hired in the summer of 1984 by the law firm of Hayner Waring Stebbins and Coffey in North Bend. Working primarily for Mike Stebbins, I learned workers' compensation law. I had very little idea what workers' compensation law was all about when I was hired. By the end of the summer, I had conducted legal research, written memoranda, written drafts of Workers' Compensation Board briefs and helped draft portions of briefs to the Court of Appeals. I went along with Stebbins to workers' compensation hearings and caught my first glimpse of "industrial justice" in action. Included in Stebbins' clientele were at least two of my co-workers from my Weyerhaeuser days, now working their way through their injuries with my boss's help. Stebbins also represented one of my high school classmates who had suffered a work injury while working at a auto body repair shop. He took this third-party case to trial and was able to get my classmate a successful verdict. Stebbins taught me more than workers' compensation law. He also taught me to respect and honor our clients and the hard work they perform, something that I try to honor in my work every day.

### Growth in a not so foreign industry

When I started trying cases myself I realized that my past experiences as a blue collar worker helped me as an attorney. My time at the mill gave me first hand

experience in the process and machinery involved in the production of lumber and plywood. I possessed valuable insight for conducting a direct examination of an injured mill worker or cross-examining an employer witness.

My introduction to OTLA came when I went to work as a law clerk and then as an associate for the law firm of Richardson Murphy and Lawrence. Don Richardson was one of the pre-eminent labor lawyers in Oregon and had been one of the nine Oregon lawyers who met at the Heathman Hotel at the creation of the Association of Trial Lawyers of America (ATLA, now AAJ) and OTLA. The training I had obtained from Mike Stebbins provided me with the transferable skills to work primarily for Allen T. "Tom" Murphy and Steve Lawrence on their civil and workers' compensation cases. Lawrence, a long time OTLA stalwart, embedded in me an abiding devotion to our organization. "OTLA comes first" Lawrence would tell me over and over again. During this time, I also worked as a part-time law clerk for my future employer and partner, Bill Skalak.

After six months with Richardson Murphy and Lawrence, I was downsized and out of a job. Again, I was left with a decision concerning my future career plans. I had a job offer from Patrick Lavis in Astoria and a job offer from a workers' compensation defense firm. The defense firm paid much better than the job in Astoria, but by then the die was set: I was to be a plaintiff's trial lawyer.

I moved back to the coast and enjoyed working for Pat Lavis in Astoria for the next four years. That experience set roots for me in Astoria where I still maintain an office and an important part of my practice. My time with Lavis ended in 1991 when I married my wife Kathy and moved back to Portland. I was fortunate to be hired by Bill Skalak and worked for him for the next four years.

In 1996, with the aid of my paralegal, Darcy Gray Southwell, I went out on my own as solo practitioner and established Martin L. Alvey, PC. Setting out on my own was scary, but if you are an OTLA member, you are never really practicing alone. The relationships you develop through OTLA mean that the answers to most questions are just a phone call away. The hardest part of solo practice to me was not having anyone to bounce ideas off. My friend and law school classmate, David Sugerman, was always available when I needed to bend his ear and I am thankful for his friendship and patience.

My years as a solo practitioner ended when I hired Robert Kinney in the summer of 2009. With Kinney part of the firm, the name changed this year to Alvey Law Group. My roots in Coos County and background working in mills have given me an appreciation for people who work hard for a living. OTLA mentors like Mike Stebbins, Don Richardson, Tom Murphy, Steve Lawrence, Pat Lavis and Bill Skalak trained me to be a better lawyer. "OTLA comes first" still rings in my ears when I think of Steve Lawrence.

I count my OTLA brothers and sisters as some of my closest friends. As we enter our 61st year as an organization, I look forward to serving OTLA in the coming year and continuing our mission, "In the Service of Justice." I urge you all to take to heart Steve Lawrence's admonition — "OTLA comes first" — and do whatever you can to help strengthen our organization in the years to come.

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*Martin Alvey practices workers' compensation, personal injury and Social Security law. His law firm, Alvey Law Group, has offices in Portland and Astoria. He contributes to the OTLA Guardians of Civil Justice at the Guardians Club Plus level. He is also an OTLA Annual Sponsor at the Gold level. The Portland office is located at 8555 SW Apple Way Ste 310, Portland OR 97225. He can be reached at 503-229-0895 or martin@alveylawgroup.com.*