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Lawyers at leisure: “Back away from the desk!”

Here's a look at some of the more interesting after-hours activities pursued by legal minds.

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

We've heard the cliché or, more accurately, the myth: lawyers and law professionals are workaholics. They have no lives, right? Because they are notoriously busy, burdened with 12-, 14-, 16-hour days, leaving time for little else, except maybe abbreviated meals and a few hours of sleep. Well, we'd like to do our part to dispel the legend of the overworked, time-strapped law professional. We talked with some busy lawyers and others in the legal profession who have found time to take pause, to get outdoors, to enjoy life, or, at the very least, to redirect their efforts – for a little while, anyway.

We tracked down an appellate attorney/athlete, a legal consultant/comedienne, a mediator/artist and a law librarian/politician. Here are our so-called myth-busters, all of whom operate or do business in Northern California.

Sam Sankar: Staying afloat and attaining goals

When Sam Sankar, former law clerk



Sankar

Sankar, a graduate of Boalt Hall School of Law at the University of California, Berkeley, is among thousands of Americans who have caught on with the sport of underwater hockey. In fact, Sankar is considered a seasoned veteran of the game, having played it since 1991.

“I was heavy into scuba diving and saw a signup sheet at the local scuba club,” Sankar said by phone from his Washington, D.C., office when asked how he discovered the sport. “It sounded like fun, so I signed up, and I’ve been playing ever since.”

The Bay Area is one of the most active regions for underwater hockey, according to Sankar. When he lived in the

to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, is not arguing appeals for the U.S. Department of Justice, he dons a set of goggles, a pair of swim fins, a bathing suit and... a hockey stick? That’s right.

area while attending law school, he played an average of three days a week. “And on any given night, there would be 25 to 30 people there,” he said.

Games and leagues are organized through clubs, and then each club will put together a tournament team of six to 10 players, Sankar said.

“Each year, I play in about five or six big tournaments,” he said. “I’ve played all over the country – San Diego, Washington, Texas, Minnesota, Ohio, Florida, Massachusetts, Colorado. I just played in a tournament out there in San Francisco (in January).”

Underwater hockey pits six players on each side and is played with a lead puck that is coated in Teflon, allowing for a slicker, speedier glide on the bottom of the pool. Goggles for vision and fins for swifter underwater maneuvering are the extent of the required uniform. There are no breathing aids beyond high-capacity lungs, Sankar said.

“I’ll tell you, I don’t have to do anything else (to stay in shape),” he said. “It’s a heck of a workout.”



And the physicality is not far removed from the more popular hockey game played on ice. In the 18 years he has played, Sankar has received more than his share of bumps and bruises and sometimes comes away with some fairly serious ailments. "I've had a broken nose, a cracked rib; it can get pretty rough," he said.

Back in the office, Sankar keeps busy as an environmental appellate attorney with the DOJ, a position he has held for about a year. Five years ago, he was clerking for Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, and then he decided to diversify himself, doing intellectual property and defense, among other areas of work, for a private D.C. firm. His career highlight? "Working for Justice O'Connor was pretty awesome," he said. "I love arguing appeals, though, so what I'm doing now is pretty great, too." For more information on underwater hockey, visit <http://www.us-auwh.com>.

Rita Makana Risser: A Lawyer Walks Into ...

Plaintiff lawyers may be losing potential clients because of what Rita Risser does in her day job. Of course, it's all with good intentions that are somewhat similar to those of employment law litigators: ensure corporations and their managers are treating workers fairly and aren't abusing their authority.

For 10 years early in her career, Risser worked as a plaintiff's lawyer in San Jose. She decided to take a different approach to some of the same problems facing plaintiffs' lawyers by becoming a legal consultant and training those in the corporate sector in how to prevent potential lawsuits.

"I just felt, you're representing one person (as a plaintiff attorney) when thousands were being treated the same way," said Risser, who is based in Honolulu but has been contracted by Silicon Valley tech giants Sun Microsystems, Cisco Systems and Oracle. "What I'm doing now is sort of resolving the situation before it gets to



Rita Risser (left) and fellow improv comics.

litigation. But it's great to have plaintiffs' attorneys out there – they're the hammer can always hold."

When she's off the clock, Risser studies and practices improvisational comedy and is hoping to someday develop what she's learned into standup comedy.

"The great thing about improv is you don't have to prepare. Plus there are other people up there with you; you're not all alone," said Risser, also known as The Court Jester. "With standup, it's *all* preparation – it's practice, practice, practice – and there's a lot of writing. And it's just you."

Risser began studying improv comedy on a whim. She joined her brother in enrolling in an eight-week course, and the siblings were so taken by the process, they repeated the course not once but twice. At the end of those 24 weeks, the teacher asked Risser and her fellow students if they would like to perform at her new theater's opening night. They agreed and called themselves First Class. "We did four shows a week for a month," Risser said. "We were the first people to ever perform in that place."

Risser has found that incorporating humor into her training is good practice for doing standup, despite the seriousness of the subjects – hiring, firing, discrimination, harassment, privacy, safety,

workplace violence. "It works because in a corporate environment, people aren't expecting you to be funny," said Risser, who counts Chris Rock and Rita Rudner among her favorite comedians. "I've never been in a situation where all people are expecting you to be funny like with standup."

Maryanne Murphy: Nurse, lawyer, painter

Fine art seems to be such a far cry from the worlds of medical science and civil law. And yet, there's Maryanne Murphy, a trained nurse and decorated plaintiff's attorney, fully entrenched in the Master's of Fine Arts program at the prestigious Academy of Art University at San Francisco.

Murphy is in her third semester studying painting and drawing, and she said it's going well.

"It's interesting because you get to meet a lot of different people from all over the nation. The university is well-re-



Murphy

garded, so it gives us (students) an opportunity to interact with people from different professions, too: the arts, academia, industry," said Murphy, who upon completion of her MFA will be qualified to be a teacher or curator or composer of art.

Murphy's MFA pursuit includes courses in cultural expression, art history and figurative painting or people in motion, which involves studying the human body much in the way Leonardo da Vinci incorporated anatomy and biology into his works of art. "I'm learning to be a good artist, who understands form, color, light and dark patterns," she said. "It's really an analytical process."

As part of her coursework, Murphy has completed about 40 pieces, she said, but she has yet to compose a piece of her own accord. One recent painting for school she spent 12 straight hours craft-



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ing. "It's just like anything else – you have to practice," she said.

Speaking of practice, Murphy calls her work as a mediator a hobby. Her latest project involves working with colleagues along with the Mediation Society of Northern California, and draws on her background in both employment law and nursing. "We're exploring the use of mediation on an ongoing basis in the delivery of healthcare," she said. "It's another way of people handling these (doctor-patient) issues, a way of resolving them without going to court."

Murphy insists her day job as the principal of Murphy Mediations in San Jose has aided her ability to finish what she starts in art class. "Being a lawyer has helped because I've already learned to discipline my mind. And you need to have the ability to follow through on your projects. And, of course, you need to be patient," she said.

Richard Schulke: After-hours politician

Providing answers and solutions to others keeps Richard Schulke busy both



Schulke

in and away from the office. As the head reference librarian at the San Francisco City and County Law Library, Schulke delivers critical information to law professionals, researchers and the general public on a daily basis. When he's not fielding those calls and e-mails, he is actively involved in politics and community service.

For years, Schulke served on San Francisco's Commission of Animal Control & Welfare, an advisory body to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors on issues of animal treatment, care, protection and management. He was involved in such major issues as the live animal markets in the City's Chinatown area, protection of the snowy plover and the Diane Whipple dog mauling case. Although still a strong advocate for animal rights, Schulke recently stepped away from the commission to attend to family matters. He does, however, speak of renewing his political aspirations.

"I'd like to get involved in something a little different (from animal advocacy)," Schulke said, "like run for the board of supervisors, or maybe get on the school board."

Schulke, a Democrat, knows there are certain ways to kick-start a political career. That's why he volunteered to work the phones at the local headquarters for Barack Obama's presidential campaign last year.

"Generally, you get involved with your party, maybe get on a local committee. You pay your dues that way and then see what develops," he said.



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