

Rural Connection Runs Deep

Relationships with the community key to a successful rural practice.

By Leah Sewell, BA '11

Kerry McQueen, '65, H '17, has had a long and illustrious career as an attorney, but you wouldn't know it just by talking to him.

McQueen has devoted more than 50 years of his practice to civil litigation, antitrust, collective bargaining agreement arbitration, education, health, and workers' compensation law. He is a stockholder and president of Sharp McQueen, P.A., with offices in Liberal and Overland Park, Kan., and is listed in Best Lawyers of America and Kansas Super Lawyers Top 100. That's only a small fraction of his exemplary track record as an attorney.

But in conversation with McQueen about all he's accomplished through the years, he frequently deflects praise and turns his warm, friendly voice toward discussion of his time volunteering to teach Sunday school in his small town of Liberal, Kan., a town of 20,000 in the southwest part of the state.

"My graduation from Washburn Law created extraordinary opportunities for me. My success started there."

"I think it's imperative that someone who practices law in rural Kansas becomes actively engaged in the community," said McQueen. "For most lawyers living in a rural environment, their business comes from their friends and neighbors."

McQueen's life took root in the tiny hamlet of Kirwin, Kan., with a population of just a few hundred people at the time, near the northern central border of the state. He received a bachelor of science in business from Fort Hays State University in 1961, and then the aspirational young man set his sights set on joining the Naval Academy.

"When I was an undergrad, my career goal was to become a naval aviator," said McQueen. But his bid for a spot in the Navy wasn't immediately successful. "I considered alternatives. I took the LSAT exam at Washburn Law, and I was accepted."

McQueen dug in his heels and embraced his unexpected new turn as a law school student.

"After completing my first semester, but before the grades were posted, I got a call back from the Navy. At the time, your grade in a class was dependent on a single file," remembered McQueen. "I declined the offer from the Navy. Then grades were posted, and I'd made it through the semester. I continued on as a law student, and my career went from there."

Fresh out of law school, McQueen accepted a position as an associate at an established law firm in Kansas City. His career would change considerably over time, taking him from an urban to a rural locale, diversifying along the way.

"I started out like most associates at a law firm, doing general practice, but developed a strong emphasis in defending insurance companies," remembered McQueen. "Because of the association I developed with the insurance companies, that practice extended to medical malpractice defense. Then, because of that work, I was invited to become the general counsel for a regional hospital in southwest Kansas."

His relocation to the Liberal area came with a learning curve, but McQueen took it in stride.

"When I was just beginning my practice in southwest Kansas, that area was the setting of one of the largest natural gas reserves in the nation. I began doing defense for a number of class action cases on behalf of the oil and gas industries," said McQueen. "I had to bring myself up to speed on how to properly handle class action cases. There was a lot more research involved."

One strategy for learning the art of class action cases was to closely observe the competition.

"You can learn a lot from your opponents who are on the other side of the table from you," said McQueen.

When it comes to being successful in a mostly rural area, McQueen points to the necessity of forming relationships, not only in the community at large, but also in the law community.

"I believe it's important that lawyers practicing in a rural area have professional memberships involving the legal profession," said McQueen.



Left – President Jerry Farley, Kerry McQueen, '65, H '17, and Dean Thomas Romig. Photo by Earl Richardson.

McQueen served on many boards, including the State Committee of the American College of Trial Lawyers, the Kansas Chapter of the Association of the American Board of Trial Advocates, the Kansas Board of Examiners of Court Reporters, and the Kansas Bar Association, to name but a few.

When, in May of 2017, McQueen was honored by Washburn University School of Law with an honorary doctorate, he expressed his pleasure, but also his surprise.

"I was humbled," he said. "I am associated with many other Washburn lawyers who deserved to receive the honor, too. As long as I've been practicing, I've been acquainted with a lot of Kansas lawyers, and I have a lot of respect for them."

McQueen said he wouldn't have achieved all that he has over the course of his career without his start at Washburn.

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On his visit to accept his honorary doctorate at the May 2017 commencement ceremony, McQueen marveled at the changes to campus since his time at the school more than 50 years ago.

"In the early sixties, we were located in Carnegie Hall," said McQueen. "Looking at the law school today—it's outstanding. And it's my understanding that there will continue to be big changes and improvements."

Looking back through the years, McQueen recognizes that he's mastered his field and worked hard to represent his clients to the best of his ability, gaining numerous accolades along the way.

But at the end of the day, it's his involvement in Sunday school and church, his work for his city, friends, and neighbors, and his connection to his rural home that count as his most valuable accomplishments.

"Success in the practice is worth a lot more than money," said McQueen. "There's a whole lot more to life than how much you earn. I've had the opportunity to do a lot of worthwhile things in my community."