

Steven Wayne Quattlebaum

Steven Quattlebaum wanted to be a lawyer ever since the seventh grade. He is now among the nation's top trial lawyers and heads the American Board of Trial Advocates this year.

*Sheila Yount
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In February 1975, Steven Quattlebaum sat next to his father on the front row of a packed White County courtroom to watch the opening statements in the trial of a prominent Searcy physician accused of murdering his wife. The scandal was the talk of the town and state, and Quattlebaum, then a seventh-grader, was allowed to miss school to attend the proceedings.

As the lawyers made their arguments, Quattlebaum was mesmerized.

“It was just like a scene out of ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’” Quattlebaum recalls. “Country, a small-town courthouse. ... When I left there, I said, ‘That’s what I want to do.’” Less than a decade later, he would fulfill his goal of becoming a lawyer, and nearly 50 years later, he would be among the nation’s top trial lawyers, specializing in what is known as complex business litigation. A founding member of Quattlebaum, Grooms & Tull in Little Rock, he is serving this year as national president of the prestigious American Board of Trial Advocates, an invitation-only organization that seeks to preserve and promote the right for a civil jury trial in accordance with the Seventh Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

“It [serving as president of ABOTA] is an opportunity to be of service to the profession in a way that I think is impactful,” Quattlebaum says.

His desire to make an impact in his work is nothing new. His parents, especially his charismatic mother, encouraged him and his two older sisters to dream big.

“She was one of those people who had a tremendous influence on others because she could motivate people to do more than they thought they were capable of doing,” Quattlebaum says.

A SON OF SEARCY

Quattlebaum was born in 1959, the youngest of three children and the only son of Ivan and Frances Quattlebaum of Searcy.

“They were a force to be reckoned with, the two of them,” Quattlebaum says. “They were incredible people.” Frances operated a music store on the courthouse square and even ran for city council, losing to the incumbent by only a few votes.

“She was an amazing woman,” he says. “She was beautiful ... she was redheaded and looked a bit like Maureen O’Hara.” Although his mother had movie star looks, it was a childhood friend of hers who ended up moving to California to become an actress. That friend, Georgia Holt, had a baby who grew up to become an iconic singer and actress named Cher.

“She [Holt] wrote a wonderful letter to the editor to the Searcy paper when Mom died, talking about my mother and how incredible she thought she was,” Quattlebaum says.

Ivan was an auctioneer, sold furniture and raised cattle, among other things.

“He just did all kinds of stuff,” Quattlebaum says. “He was one of those small-town wheeler-dealers.” In addition to his parents, Quattlebaum says, he was greatly influenced by the community of Searcy, which he says provided him with “one of those wonderful small-town experiences where you knew everybody.” The saying, “It takes a village,” aptly described his life growing up in Searcy, he says. “The entire community was sort of a village and friends, parents, they all participated,” he says. “I played sports as a kid. So, there were always my buddies’ dads who were coaches and my mom’s friends were schoolteachers and other business owners in town.” He played baseball and football for Searcy High School, serving as co-captain of the football team. His favorite pastime was water skiing at nearby Greers Ferry Lake.

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In 1978, during his senior year, Quattlebaum’s interest in politics grew, prompting him to secure a “little building” that he painted and transformed into the local campaign headquarters for Bill Clinton’s campaign for governor of Arkansas. Whenever Clinton would come to Searcy or nearby towns such as Bald Knob, Quattlebaum was there to drive him to the Kiwanis and Rotary clubs and other campaign stops.

That same year, Quattlebaum met Jim Ranchino, a political science professor at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia and the state’s leading political pollster. A former NFL player, Ranchino was “very charismatic, very fun,” Quattlebaum says, adding that he inspired him to go to Ouachita and study political science as preparation for law school. In addition to taking classes from Ranchino, Quattlebaum also worked at Ranchino’s polling business.

On Nov. 7, 1978, Ranchino died unexpectedly of a heart attack at the Channel 7, KATV, television station in Little Rock. It was election night, and Ranchino was part of the station's coverage team. "It was difficult for me and for a lot of people there who were influenced by him," he says. "So, at that point, I thought, 'I want to go to school somewhere else.'" Somewhere else for Quattlebaum turned out to be Western Colorado University, located in Gunnison, Colo., in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. Here he was a man with a mission as he graduated with a bachelor's degree in political science in May 1981, a year early. He then decided to return home for law school at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. His goal was to practice law in his home state. As for politics, he says his interest waned as he got older.

FULFILLING THE DREAM

After graduating from law school in December 1983, Quattlebaum began his legal career as a clerk for U.S. District Judge H. Franklin Waters of the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Arkansas in Fort Smith.

Although he had worked various jobs while in high school and college, Quattlebaum says the clerkship "was my first sort of job in any professional capacity." Waters was a "great teacher" with integrity and "reverence for the law," he adds.

His desire to be a trial lawyer was further cemented here as he watched many trials with good and bad lawyers.

Then, after two years in Fort Smith, Quattlebaum moved to Little Rock to work for one of the city's leading law firms, Wright, Lindsey & Jennings. Here he would meet many exemplary trial lawyers, including Gordon Rather.

"He has been a supporter and mentor of mine from the day I walked in the door of that place, and still is," Quattlebaum says.

While at Wright, Lindsey & Jennings, Quattlebaum tried cases with several lawyers, further honing his skills. His first case on his own involved a school millage issue in Faulkner County. He didn't win that one. In his next case, he represented Walmart in a case where a woman alleged she had slipped in one of the company's stores and hurt her back. He won that one.

In January 1989, Quattlebaum moved to the then new firm of Williams & Anderson in Little Rock where he would work for the next 12 years. Shortly after his arrival, his career took a new path when he represented Uniroyal, a chemical company that had done business with Vertac Chemical Corp. of Memphis, in a lawsuit brought by the state of Arkansas and the federal Environmental Protection Agency regarding costs related to the clean-up of hazardous wastes.

"Uniroyal was a small player in that, but they were determined that they were not liable," Quattlebaum says, adding that "it was very complex scientific case" as well as a complicated business transaction.

Because of that case, he began to get referrals for other environmental cases, such as a lawsuit regarding the Koppers plant in North Little Rock, which treated telephone poles and cross-ties with creosote. Quattlebaum represented Koppers and was able to secure a favorable settlement for the company.

During this time, Quattlebaum, along with colleagues John Tull and Tim Grooms, decided to start their own firm, Quattlebaum, Grooms & Tull in Little Rock, which opened its doors on July 1, 2000.

With the new firm, Quattlebaum continued developing his specialty of complex scientific casework. Those included cases for the welding industry brought by plaintiffs who alleged that fumes from the welding process were causing health problems. He also represented Johnson & Johnson in lawsuits related to hip replacement equipment and baby powder.

In addition, he and his firm have handled a wide variety of business litigation. “In Arkansas, if you do one kind of complex litigation, then people will call you for another kind of complex litigation because it involves similar skill sets,” Quattlebaum says. “The intricate details of the case may vary from case to case, but the skill set of taking a complicated issue, making it understandable and being able to support the proposition that you’re advocating with credible evidence is a similar skill set, whether it’s a science case or it’s a business case or it’s an intellectual property case.”

ON THE ROAD

A longtime member of ABOTA, Quattlebaum was elected by his peers within the group to serve as national president for 2023, a role that Rather calls “an extraordinary honor.” “Steve has done a wonderful job as national president for ABOTA this year,” says Rather, who served as American Board of Trial Advocates president in 1996. Rather adds that Quattlebaum is a “wonderful listener,” a skill needed in the president’s role.

“When we have an executive committee meeting, he listens carefully and thoughtfully to what everyone has to say,” Rather says. “And then he has a unique ability to pull it all together in a meaningful way that seems to take everyone’s position into account.” Quattlebaum’s trial advocates board term began in January and has kept him busy and on the road.

“I’ve devoted almost my entire time [this year] to being president of ABOTA,” Quattlebaum says.

The group has four missions, including the primary mission of preserving the trial by jury in civil cases as guaranteed by the Seventh Amendment. The other three missions are promoting the adherence to the rule of law, defending the independence of the judiciary and promoting and establishing professionalism, integrity and civility in the practice of law.

“We are incredibly active as an organization,” he says. “There is an ABOTA event occurring virtually every week somewhere in the country.” The group’s work is perhaps more important now than ever, Quattlebaum says, noting that the judiciary has been under attack recently by politicians and even grand jurors have been threatened in Georgia in criminal cases involving the 2020 presidential election.

In addition, he says the number of jury trials in the nation is on a “steadily diminishing trajectory.” In the early years of his career, he knew lawyers who tried 20 to 30 jury trials a year. He alone was involved in eight trials in one year. But the pressure to settle cases has grown, in large part because preparing for trials is expensive.

To help lower costs for trial preparation, Quattlebaum says the American Board of Trial Advocates has developed an expedited jury trial procedure that is lowering costs.

In addition, the development of artificial intelligence software to help with document research is helping lower costs for trial preparation, he says.

“You want to have the opportunity to present your case at trial and not feel like you are compelled to settle the case because of external pressure,” he says, adding that “you don’t want to have the pressures of the

expense associated with it driving the settlement. The resolution ought to be based on the merits of the case, not the external forces.” Before his term as American Board of Trial Advocates president is over, he will welcome the board to Little Rock on Oct. 5-7 for the group’s national meeting and a program, open to the public, titled “Modern Jury Trials: The Effect of Today’s America on a ‘Jury of Your Peers.’”

ON THE PERSONAL SIDE

Although Quattlebaum is known for being an extremely hard worker, he makes time for fun as well. His favorite activities are wildlife photography, hiking, especially in Colorado, and snow skiing. He even climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania in 2017 with a group of friends and colleagues. After the climb, they went on a photographic African safari, an experience he describes as “pretty incredible.” Another major milestone in his life is planned for next spring — his marriage to Kathy Gornatti, a pharmaceutical representative. They met after he saw her photo on a friend’s Facebook page and asked the friend to introduce them.

When it comes to his professional future, Quattlebaum says he and his firm do not have a specific goal for growth of the business. Instead, their goal is “to provide the very best service that our clients can get anywhere in the country. And if we do that, we will have happy clients. And if we have happy clients, they will come back and they will send other clients to us.” Quattlebaum says he believes that clients hire lawyers and not firms.

“If you have great talented lawyers that you associate with, they will attract business,” he says. “And, so, we do our dead level best to have very talented lawyers in our firm.”

SELF PORTRAIT

Steven Quattlebaum

m **THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE I’VE RECEIVED:** Approach every task and every case with a commitment to excellence and a complete dedication of effort.

m **MY FAVORITE CHILDHOOD MEMORIES INCLUDE:** Holidays with my family, complete with Mom’s chocolate pie and my grandmother’s homemade ice cream.

m **THE BEST TIME OF DAY FOR ME:** Sunrise is my favorite time of day.

m **IF I WERE NOT A LAWYER, I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO HAVE BEEN:** In the investment and finance profession.

m **MY BUCKET LIST INCLUDES:** Skydiving and photographic safaris in Africa and Alaska.

m **PROUDEST ACCOMPLISHMENT:** I am very proud that my partners and I have created a law firm that is comprised of splendid lawyers who possess an intense dedication to providing the best service possible to our clients in a professional and ethical manner

m **BEST PART OF MY JOB:** Helping clients successfully address some of the most important challenges they are facing in their personal or professional lives.

m **SOMETHING FEW PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT ME:** I very much appreciate architecture and interior design.

m **I WISH I HAD MORE TIME TO:** Do everything: snow ski, hike, photography, travel, read.

m **MY FAVORITE MEAL IS:** Breakfast. I love a good, fun breakfast, especially with friends when we are skiing.

m **ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP:** I hope it is “dependable.”