

Law prepared Sullivan well for political service

By DEBRA BAKER BECK, Alumnus Editor

Distinguished alumnus Mike Sullivan (BS '61, JD '64) was a political rookie when he ran for, and won, the Wyoming governorship in 1986.

But fortunately, he found enough similarities to his primary career, law, that he managed to do just fine.

"One of the beauties of it (law) is that you walk in in the morning and you never know for sure where the day is going to take you or what's liable to come in the door," Sullivan says. "That's certainly true with being governor." During his eight years in office, one never knew what issues, opportunities or concerns might arise in the capitol.

"They may wander up and look you in the face, or they may drop right on your head," he says.

Believe it or not, the only political experience Sullivan had before running for governor was a term on the ASUW Student Senate. There were no grand plans for statesmanship, only a seized opportunity to serve.

Sullivan says he got to a point in his life where he was stable and successful enough professionally. He really wasn't looking for a career change; but he began to ask himself, "do you need to accept a greater challenge, and can you make a contribution?"

The answer to that question led to his successful 1986 run.

"I thought I could contribute to the campaign in a positive and constructive way and, if I got elected, that I might be able to learn enough to be a good governor," he says.

Obviously, Sullivan found that the "D" behind his name on the ballot wasn't a hindrance in a Republican-dominated state.

"Wyoming will consider people on their merits as individuals, rather than writing them off simply because they're of one party or the other," he explains. "Moderate Democrats who understand the issues of Wyoming can be, and have been, successful — and that will continue to be the case in the future."

Admittedly, as a Democrat he had a smaller base from which to build support. But another hallmark of Wyoming, its size, helped overcome that initial obstacle.

"We're a small enough state that we have an opportunity to become acquainted on a more personal basis than most other places."

History will define the Sullivan administration's legacy. But he hopes that people remember how he and other state leaders kept Wyoming on a steady course through difficult economic times.

"It was a time when we could have decimated state services," he says, as budget cuts were big and fears even bigger. People looked to him, and to legislative leaders, for "strange and wondrous solutions" to tough problems. Instead, they provided an even direction for the state and avoided risky policy decisions. "Not fanning the fires" was a major goal.

The state's citizens apparently liked what they saw in Sullivan's leadership abilities: when they re-elected him in 1990, they did so by a margin unmatched before or since.

National Stage

Taking Wyoming's place at the regional and national tables was an important part of Sullivan's job.



Mike Sullivan

He assumed leadership roles, both on the Western Governors Association (which he chaired at one point) and the National Governors Association (where he served on the board and chaired its Natural Resources Committee, School Years Action Team and Indian Gaming Work Group).

Not only was this service important for the state politically, but it also was a time for Sullivan to engage in some creative discussions about common problems.

"We had all the same issues that the other states, big or small, had," he notes. While Wyoming deals with some unique circumstances, such as its public lands status, it had much more in common when it came to issues such as education, welfare and disaster aid. Sullivan used that time to learn about various problem-solving models and how to apply the best fits to Wyoming. He also got to contribute to the national discussion on important issues and usually left feeling pretty good about his home state.

"We in Wyoming can make decisions that are just as correct and just as thoughtful as anybody else," he says. "All in all, we're very fortunate."

Legal Career

Sullivan's political service was just a short detour on a long and distinguished legal career. He originally balked at following his grandfather, father and uncle into law and entered UW to earn a petroleum engineering degree. But about three years into that process, Sullivan decided law really was where he needed to be. He completed the engineering course work, graduating in the first class to receive a petroleum engineering degree (versus a concentration), then entered UW's law school.

He pondered joining his father's practice in Dou-

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glas, Wyo., but decided that ultimately he would regret not trying different experiences first. So he headed north to Casper — "which was, to me, going to the city" — and went to work for Brown, Drew. (He's still there, by the way.)

Biographical Information

Mike and Jane (Metzler) Sullivan have three children: Michelle Sullivan-Kuehl, Patrick Sullivan (BS '89) and Theresa Sullivan Twiford (BA '92). They also have two grandchildren, Michael James and Jack.

Currently, Sullivan chairs the Policy Consensus Institute, a public policy board advancing the use of alternative dispute resolution in state policy issues. He also serves on the Buffalo Bill Museum board of directors and is a trustee of the Catholic Diocese of Wyoming.

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Specialization isn't really practical for most attorneys practicing in Wyoming, and Sullivan has handled nearly every type of case over the years. But before he left for the governorship, he focused primarily on medical malpractice defense and litigation. Since returning in 1997, he has spent a lot of time dealing with litigation, public policy and general practice.

"I enjoy the diversity of the practice of law," Sullivan says.

He does enjoy trial work.

"But I also enjoy dealing with people and trying to help them solve problems," he says. "Dealing, one-on-one, with a client is a very satisfying part of the practice of law."

Has his approach to law changed much since returning to practice? Sullivan hopes not.

"My political experience has probably given me a broader vision of issues and problems — certainly public issues, statewide issues and national as well," he says. "But I would hope that, as a lawyer, after 23 years of practice...I had developed a sensitivity and a concern for issues and people's problems and that I carried that into politics and, hopefully, out of politics."

Certain legal successes — and disappointments — stick out in his mind. One particularly satisfying experience came early in his career when, as a young attorney, he helped lobby a 1967 bill that opened the state's trona mines for expansion. It was a massive legislative effort, one he and the rest of his firm launched with little political experience. That didn't seem to matter, as the bill passed the Wyoming Legislature and provided a window for growth in the trona industry.

Sullivan says he's generally very satisfied with the way his life has evolved.

"My experience has been that even the things that you would change contributed to experience and learning that, ultimately, were helpful," he says. "Unless you have some failures you don't grow much."

The Long Way Home

After he left office, Sullivan didn't immediately return to the law office. Instead, he and his wife, Jane (BA '61), traveled the country. Over 70 days, the couple visited 29 states and logged 10,000 miles — all with no plans or reservations anywhere. They then returned to Wyoming, where Mike rejoined Brown, Drew, Massey & Sullivan.

Sullivan left again in the fall of 1996 for a semester at Harvard University, where he held an Institute of Politics Fellowship at the Kennedy School of Government. The program was designed to link politicians and other public servants with undergraduates in the hope of inspiring the latter to consider careers in public service. As part of his fellowship, Sullivan taught a weekly seminar on the politics of the western United States. It was a great experience,

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Prior to serving as governor, his civic/philanthropic activities included: Casper Rotary Club (president), Natrona County Hospital board (chairman), St. Joseph Orphanage board, Natrona County United Fund, Shepherd of the Valley Nursing Home board, Norwest Bank-West Casper board.

Service to UW includes: UW Alumni Association board (former), Institute for Environment and Natural Resources board, *Land and Water Law Review* advisory board, College of Engineering national advisory board, Cowboy Joe Club.

Awards include: Eleanor P. Williams Arthritis Award (1996), Bob Forrester Youth Award (1995), UW College of Law Outstanding Alumnus Award.