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Profiles in the Law

From the Courtroom to the World

By Melody Finnemore



Michael Royce has long felt the call to action. In fact, it could be said that advocacy runs in his veins, passed down the bloodline by parents who were activists.

"My father, Henry Reuss, was in Congress for 28 years as a Democrat from Wisconsin and was the author of the legislation that created the Peace Corps. My mother was

definitely a good moral voice during our childhoods," said Royce, who changed the spelling of his last name.

Though Royce also felt a call to improve conditions for people who were less fortunate, a career as an attorney wasn't at all what he had in mind for himself.

"Since my great grandfather, father, brother, aunt, a cousin and various other family members and friends were all lawyers, I had avoided the idea of becoming a lawyer like the plague," he said.

After graduating from high school in 1964, Royce ventured from Washington, D. C., to Mississippi where he quickly learned some hard lessons about the battle for what is right.

"It had quite an impact on my life, because I was 18 and people were being killed for fighting for civil rights," he said.

Royce later held a series of jobs, including a two-year stint as a community organizer in Kentucky, before deciding a legal career might be his calling after all. He attended law school at Lewis & Clark College, where he met Doug Swanson and Ray Thomas. The three graduated in 1979 and a year later started what would become one of Portland's top product liability firms, Royce Swanson Thomas & Coon.

"We consciously formed a law firm that would be socially involved and politically active. We all knew we wanted to serve as best we could those who are not served by the legal system: working people, homeless people and others who don't have access to attorneys," Royce said. "We did a lot of pro bono criminal defense, like the people who protested against apartheid in South Africa, and we represented Haitian refugees who were seeking asylum."

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Royce put his values into practice by trying cases involving workers' compensation, disability law and Social Security issues. He also specialized in product liability cases in which people were being harmed by toxic chemicals.

"To my surprise I actually enjoyed the mix of science and law, and it was definitely complex litigation," he said, adding that in a seven-year period he represented close to 150 professional painters who suffered serious health problems from harmful chemicals encountered on the job. "Essentially we forced the industry to change its way of doing business and put warnings on cans of paint. We were able to improve the safety of the industry."

One of Royce's most memorable cases involved a million-dollar victory for a client who suffered heavy metal poisoning from a water heater.

"I guess I've always liked being on the white horse representing the underdog," he said. "Of course, all of the defense attorneys I worked with would probably call me a shark."

Despite a successful run in the courtroom, Royce left the firm in 1995 and began to think about forming an organization that would use renewable energy to promote sustainable social and environmental practices. In 1997, he started Green Empowerment (on the Internet at www.greenempowerment.org), a non-profit organization that works in developing nations to provide residential lighting and electricity; power for schools and clinics; energy for economic development; comprehensive, community environmental plans and watershed protection; and the establishment and protection of potable water sources.

Since founding Green Empowerment, Royce has partnered with the likes of novelist Barbara Kingsolver to promote the need for renewable energy sources. He has traveled to Nicaragua, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia to work with other non-governmental organizations to develop small hydropower, biomass, wind and solar power projects. Royce's international outreach efforts will carry him to Guatemala, Nicaragua and Ecuador this month.

"What I think I'm best at and enjoy the most is working with people to help create an organization that serves a vision of sustainability, their vision and mine," he said. "I also really like different cultures and understanding how different people view the world."

Though Royce and Swanson parted ways on the career front, they have joined forces through Green Empowerment. Swanson, a member of the board of directors, said the organization gives him a chance to pursue his interest in environmental issues.

"The work we're doing is important and exciting. It takes me outside of my every day litigation experience," he said. "I think there are things that are important other than the law and there are other things I can do besides practicing law. It's a good vehicle for that."

It also gives the longtime friends a chance to continue working together, Swanson added. "Our friendship is, for me, unique. It's based upon shared values and the idea that by doing a little bit someone can change things."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melody Finnemore is a Portland freelance writer.