

# Dean Standish Perkins

## By Stefani Quane

When you enter Dean Standish Perkins' 16th floor office suite with its orange wall you first see a violent looking painting. To me the painting was a Bird of Paradise mingled to a car accident with an evil person lurking in the background. An ambulance chaser leaving his card at the accident scene came to mind.

Dean Perkins has inhabited the 16th floor of the Regence Building for 18 years. As he leaves the reception area and heads back to his corner office you'll notice other artwork from Native American to abstract.

Many people know Dean from his yellow page pictures. In 1991, he was the first advertiser in our area on the "tab" page of the yellow pages. The tab pages is the hard divider page in the middle of the phone book. 1991, with that costly tab ad, marks the launch of Dean's successful personal injury practice.

## Before the Law

Dean was born in Tacoma and lived in the area until his family moved to California when he was in high school. His father was in the insurance industry, and, rather than accompany Dean to sports events when Dean was young, his father dragged Dean to art galleries and museums. This explains Dean's current love of art. His father went on to become an amateur painter in retirement and many of his paintings adorn Dean's office. Dean was not given a free ride in college. He worked and paid his own way through school, mostly working in the food service industry. He says that, at the time he was unhappy about footing the bill, but later in life he's come to see that paying for his own school helped him have a sense of appreciation for the things he's acquired and the gifts and opportunities he's received in life.

Dean attended Whitman College for a few years and completed his undergraduate degree from University of California, Berkeley in 1982. He went straight into law school at University of Puget Sound.

He financed law school working as a waiter, bartender and model. As you'll notice from his current three-page yellow page ad, Dean Standish Perkins is a handsome man. He looks like your quintessential outdoorsy Northwest guy. During law school, he started picking up modeling jobs doing primarily action type photo shoots for local companies like Eddie Bauer, Nordstrom and Lamonts.

## The Rough First Six Years

After law school the graduated in 1985), he wasn't able to find a law job. So he kept up his modeling gigs and the Red Robin water job. He admits that he wasn't one of the top students at U.P.S. and a big firm job didn't open up for him after graduation—not that the big firm grind appealed to him anyway.

According to Dean, he always wanted to work for himself. So after studying for the bar, he rented an office for \$100 a month and opened his solo practice in 1985. He'd work as a lawyer until four p.m., and then hike over to the Red Robin to serve Bona Burgers. "Sometimes, my customers would be law school classmates. That was humiliating."

He met his wife, Joan, the next year in 1986. Soon, she started stopping by the firm in the afternoon after work to answer his phone. She'd answer, put the

caller on hold, and then after a suitable waiting time, he'd answer the phone a few feet away.

In those first years, he didn't use a computer and typed everything on a Smith-Corona typewriter. He was starting a solo practice with \$60,000 in student loan debt. When he would get windfalls from his modeling work, he'd invest it back into the law practice. That's how he financed his first computer.

In those first few years working for himself, his friends called him the "Maytag Man"—sitting around with nothing to do. But slowly, his friends and contacts through modeling started sending him cases. He took everything that came through the door.

He got his early trial experience between 1986 and 1988 doing such work as defending in a rape trial and in a robbery trial. He doesn't recommend this hard route to other new lawyers. He attributes his early career risks to inflated confidence. In those early years, he had an overriding sense it was all going to work out.

From those early years with the mixed assortment of cases, he came to the conclusion he preferred personal injury work. He didn't enjoy meticulous billing, getting paid up front before doing the work, or the bill collecting required in his other cases. He liked the medical aspect to personal injury cases.

## 1991—the Year of the Great Shift

1991 may be just about the most pivotal year in Dean Standish's life. This is the year his first child was born. Following another modeling job windfall, he felt it was time to promote his legal practice. Thus, he decided

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to get aggressive with the yellow pages, and became the first "tab" guy in Seattle. That financial risk paid off. In 1991 he had enough business to hire his second associate and a paralegal. His office expanded from a small place on Capitol Hill to the Regence Building downtown at Ninth and Olive, where he has rented ever since.

He admits there was a stigma about being a plaintiff attorney who takes out a big ad in the yellow pages, but he says

that it allowed him to meet and help some very nice people over the years. He continued the tab ad for three years during which time his practice experienced explosive growth. The ad allowed him to finally quit his Red Robin night job.

He has never given up yellow page ads completely. He traded in the tab ads for extended pages and more phone books, including phone books for south and north King County. As an insider, he says that Federal Way is the Pierce

County line is a very fertile area for auto accidents.

He was excited for several years about building his legal empire. The largest his firm ever got was 18 to 20 employees in 1995 and 1996. He never made someone partner. "I never saw the point." Plus, he thinks he is very set in his ways. If he were to exit at the end of his career as an asset strategy.

## The Wall of Fame

Dean's office wall next to his desk has dozens of enlarged framed settlement checks. These are big settlement checks. \$300,000, \$500,000, \$1.9 million. I've never seen anything framed and displayed settlement checks before, but he says that many plaintiffs' attorneys display their settlements like this. In fact, he learned the technique from another lawyer.

He says that many of his clients come to him wanting to know: Have you ever handled a case like mine before? What have you gotten for other people? How much money can you get for me? "Part of me finds posting checks to be tacky," Dean says, "but it's part of the credentialing. I've yet to be asked about my law school GPA."

I asked him about his most satisfying cases. "I'm not sure if I have one most satisfying case." But then he tells me about an Ethiopian family who came to the United States as political refugees. They were injured in an accident. Liability was not easy, but he got the family a bigger settlement. The couple was able to buy a house and put their kids through school. The son, Fathi Mohammed, inspired by Dean's work as a lawyer for the family, later went on to law school at Oxford in England. Now that he has graduated, Fathi will be starting to work for Dean.

## Is Dean Too Nice and Good Looking to be Real?

The entire time I was interviewing Dean, I kept thinking, this guy can't be this good looking and this kind. But, the *Bar Bulletin* doesn't pay me for reporting and I can't really do heavy background investigation on a profile. Still the question lingered.

My answer to the "too nice to be true" question came when I got a call from his office staff on a day I was super stressed out and grouchy. I immediately wanted to reject a special request coming from his office. What I wasn't prepared for was a sweet office worker calling to ask if we could include a birthday greeting to him from the folks at his office. My cynical, hard heart melted and I had my answer. Not only is Dean good looking and charming, but his staff obviously adores him. So Dean, at their request, "Have a Happy 45th!" They wish you the best.

## The Most Important Part of His Life

Since 1996, Dean has been intentionally downsizing his firm to spend more time with his wife Joan and their kids: Miles, who is 12; Chase, who is seven; and Emma, who is four.

Dean has massaged his practice so that he can take off afternoons to coach several children's baseball teams. He coached 75 games last year. "My life as a dad is the primary focus of my being

right now." He never works on the weekend if he can help it.

He says that he could have made a lot more money in his practice but he chose to have a balanced life with time for family. Having his own firm allows him to cut his own deal as he needs.

The other activity that he leaves time for is health. He works out regularly and it shows. At 45, he looks like he is in his 30's. He always finds time to exercise. He gets his best ideas and clarity on issues when exercising.

## Where to Next

Dean just signed another five-year lease. He says that he sees himself continuing down the same path. "I want to continue helping good people. I've got a great life. I'm aware I'm a super lucky guy. I don't feel the need to change anything, but just want to continue doing what I am doing." At most, he sees himself eventually moving his practice closer to his Eastside home. "Why would a person want to leave the law? It's so flexible, you can always remake your legal career to suit your needs."

And with that, Dean gave me his high-fiving smile.

On the way out, he showed me the artwork that he had painted and the art he received as gifts from his clients. I asked him, "What do you do with the ugly paintings clients send you?" He didn't answer, but from the looks of the copy room, he hangs them there.

Our interview concluded in the reception area in front of that scary Bird of Paradise painting—the one I thought was the auto accident scene with the ambulance-chasing attorney leaving a business card. Dean said, "This painting is one that was painted for me by a good friend of mine. It is based on a picture that hung in my grandfather's law office. It's supposed to depict the courtroom battle." To which I responded, "And this scary dark guy is the plaintiff's attorney, right?" "No," said Dean. "I've always thought of him as the insurance adjuster." ■

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