

## Profile / Bob Anderton

# Coming Full Cycle

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By Joseph Shaub

A classic Bob Anderton moment — we were walking to lunch a week before the election and I kidded him about his Obama T-shirt, telling him that he was only coming out for the guy now that he was going to win. Bob laughed and invited me to check out how faded the shirt was, assuring me he was there at the beginning.

The reason this is a classic moment is that, if Bob Anderton is anything, he is committed to the political and social well-being of his community. Every election cycle, for example, he sends out his recommendations for every single office and proposition. Those who know him always find these e-missives informative and helpful if you're on the progressive side of things and haven't had a chance to study the many down-ballot races.

Raised and educated in Iowa (he lived on Iowa Avenue in Iowa City while pursuing his journalism degree at the University of Iowa), Anderton came out to Seattle with his wife Wendy in the early '90s. Working for a time with Justice Tom Chambers, when he maintained his personal injury practice, and later with attorney David Roth, Anderton found that he could be a "public interest attorney" (his first career choice) by representing injured people who were on the margins of our society — immigrants with halting English, part-time or low-wage workers or others who did not garner respect from society or governmental institutions. When he decided in 1999 to go off on his own, he was amazed, and gratified, to see many of these people, and their referrals, going with him.

Anderton eventually evolved a niche practice, becoming Seattle's premier bike lawyer. Walk down Second Avenue, and at Cherry, if you look up at the Hoge Building, you'll see a neon bicycle in a window. That's Anderton's office.

An avid cyclist his whole life, Anderton came into bike law quite naturally. He actually loved biking through the Iowa winters. "Riding on fresh snow is *fun*," he claims to a dubious audience.

Yet, positioning his practice as a successful bike lawyer has not been a function of hard-sell advertising. He built it through projection of an appreciation of his clients' values. "Bicyclists are great clients," he says. "They are self-sufficient. They don't run to the doctor or call a lawyer unless they are really hurt. If anything, they under-treat, which juries like."

Bicycle messenger, Matt Case, is a client in point. He suffered a common cyclist's accident — he was "doored." Some inattentive driver opened the door of her parked car right in the path of Case's oncoming bike. He slammed into the door and was hurt, but didn't think of seeking compensation for the damage to his bike and his body until several months later when he was contacted by the driver's insurance company seeking compensation from *him* for damage to the car. At that point, he contacted Anderton, who had a reputation as the "go-to" lawyer for many bicycle messengers. Case ultimately received appropriate compensation for injuries he was naturally inclined to ignore.

Anderton notes that he enjoys working with cyclists because "they are *not malingerers*. Cyclists are physically active, healthy people as a rule, who only want to get back on their bikes and get on with their lives." With



a practice that now devotes about 80% of its energy to representation of cyclists, Anderton has found a client base whose values he shares and with whom he unabashedly enjoys working.

Bike law also represents the intersection of a conventional personal injury practice with the political activism that is equally important to Anderton. Longtime community activist and cycling organizer, Davey Oil, compliments Anderton for his efforts to educate and support the cycling community. While many attorneys are avid bicycle tourists and can understand the draw of cycling, Oil describes a very different population of bicyclists: those who don't own a shred of spandex and bike because they can't afford a car or because bikes are their living (like the ubiquitous ABC messengers).

"Bob shows respect for everybody," observed Oil. "He is always available to talk about cyclists' rights at workshops we put on. Cyclists who are injured in accidents think that society and the government have this attitude that they shouldn't be on the road and so they

don't defend their rights. Bob speaks to this cycling community and lets them know they have legal rights. He respects us and it matters." Matt Case describes Bob as a "spectacularly nice guy."

Anderton's office practices are designed to ensure his support and respect for his clients. Among his novel and effective ideas includes taking a picture of every client at the initial interview, so that he can always have a face for the name on the file. When volume grows in a busy practice, it's often easy for lawyers to lose sight of the individuality of each client. Anderton's photos never allow him to do that.

However, say what you will about Anderton, any affection for him among his peers is dwarfed by that felt for his dog, Stan, a Border Collie/Irish Wolfhound mix who, for years, would accompany Bob to the office. His suite-mates, including me, would go through the daily ritual of nodding and mumbling to Anderton, "Hi Bob," only to fawn over his canine associate — "STAN! Hi Stan. How's Stanley?" The dog would stretch and laconically stroll over for an ear scratch and then go lie back down. When Bob left that suite to move across the street, he was asked, "Do you have to take Stan with you?" Such is the reverence with which Bob Anderton is held by his colleagues.

Bob has numerous pursuits outside of the practice. He was the editor of the Bar Bulletin from 2001–05. It was under his regime that the Bar Bulletin instituted its monthly theme issues (*viz*, Niche this month). He's a writer as well, currently embarking on a project to write a novel in one month. He and his wife Wendy are still remembered for their film, shown at the Georgetown Super-8 Film Festival, aptly titled "Bike Man vs. The Fossil."

His two passions remain progressive politics and support of the biking community. Oil recounts the time that a pair of cyclists were struck by a dump truck that drifted into a bike lane, killing one of them. A local paper ran a story that characterized the cyclists as responsible for the accident — a common, mistaken thread in many bicycle-motor vehicle accidents. After Anderton and others pointed out the actual laws involved, the paper "backpedaled" from laying blame based upon the type of bikes involved.

"Even though Seattle fashions itself as a bike-friendly city, that impression is really misleading. Many drivers don't like to share the road with bikes and the City's actions don't help," Anderton says.

He notes the failure of the City's 149-page Bike Master Plan to even mention the new South Lake Union Trolley, known to some as the SLUT. Its tracks meander in and out of marked lanes, creating a significant new hazard for bicyclists. Another longstanding complaint of Seattle's biking community involves the hundreds of curbside sewer grates, some of which are more than 100 years old and have openings running parallel to a bike's path, with enough room between the metal staves to catch a bicycle wheel and send a rider tumbling to the ground.

Anderton has represented several bicyclists injured on these grates who were willing to drop their claims (including any attorney fee) in exchange for a commitment from the City to survey and replace these grates. These offers were rejected and the City still does not know the number of dangerous grates that remain. Anderton reached a monetary settlement for one such client and litigation is ongoing for others.

Building a practice that, according to Anderton's card, focuses on "Representing People, Not Corporations," has been an exercise in community outreach and education, with a touch of good fortune. Google "Washington bike lawyer" and the first five hits all refer to Bob Anderton, through no paid placements on his part.

Anderton eschews conventional marketing such as Yellow Pages ads. Without advertising, the key thing that keeps clients coming to his door is the respect he shows to every client. "Bob is about cyclists' rights and cyclists' empowerment," Oil says, and that has gone a long way toward cementing Anderton's place as Seattle's premier bike lawyer. ■

*Joseph Shaub is a family lawyer and family guy who used to share office space with Bob and Stan. Now he occasionally waves from across the street.*