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Patent Attorney Plumbs Depths, Scales Heights

Getting there is the hard part for spelunker and scuba diver

By MARIE P. GRADY

As a 12-year-old, Keith Murphy was awestruck when the German family hosting him on an exchange program took him on a visit to the Alps. It wasn't just the snow-capped, majestic peaks that enthralled him but the sight of nimble climbers scaling its formidable heights.

Once back home, he persuaded his parents to bring him and his younger brother to the Shawangunks Mountains in New Paltz, N.Y. There, weekend after weekend, they would hone their skills on steep cliffs in what was the beginning of a lifelong love affair with rock climbing.

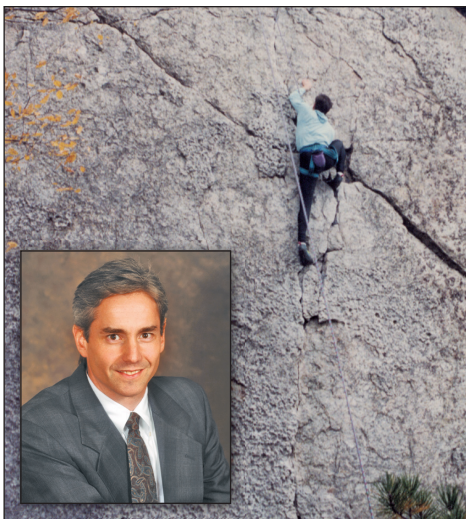
But Murphy hasn't just mastered cliffs and mountains. When he isn't working on complex patent transactions as a partner and co-chair of the Mechanical and Electrical Department at Cantor Colburn, he is often plumbing the depths of earth and ocean as an avid spelunker and scuba diver.

To say that he likes a challenge may be an understatement.

"I tend to gravitate toward things that are difficult," he says. "I like to do it because it's fun and it's a challenge."

Michael Cantor, co-managing partner of the firm, said Murphy dives into complex legal issues with equal enthusiasm. "Keith attacks his legal work with the same intensity he has for outdoor adventures," Cantor said.

Rock climbing is a family affair for the Murphys. He met his wife while the two



Contributed Photos

Keith J. Murphy, a patent attorney at Cantor Colburn in Hartford, scales a rock face several years ago at Seneca Rocks in West Virginia. He is also a spelunker and scuba diver.

were climbing in New Paltz. His two children are too young to climb cliffs or explore caves but are learning to climb on indoor courses.

Both climbing and cave exploration require a combination of strength, concentration and coordination. They also require a respect for nature. Cave explorers, for instance, must remember not to touch active stalactites, or those dripping, icicle-shaped structures hanging from cavern ceilings, because the oil from human skin can halt their formation.

Instead, spelunkers stand back in wonder at the often surreal splendor that awaits them under the Earth's surface.

"A cave is a three-dimensional environment, so it's a puzzle," Murphy said. "It can be scary because you're under tons of earth."

Small Opening

Getting there is the hard part. To get to

one underground cave in West Virginia, Murphy had to shimmy into an opening that amounted to little more than a large crevice and slide down a 60-foot angular slope of debris. But the adventure was worth it. At the end, a small opening led to a large room big enough for six semi-trucks to drive side by side.

Finding the caves is the first hurdle. The spelunker community is close-mouthed about the location of many caves, fearing that public knowledge of the sites would draw too many novices who might not leave the space how they found it.

In Connecticut, most have voluntarily stopped or cut down on cave exploration because of concerns their clothes and gear have helped spread the fungus blamed for wiping out a large part of the bat population.

When caving isn't on the itinerary, there is always rock climbing. Murphy said his most difficult climb was rated a 5.11R at

Seneca Rocks in West Virginia. Under the rating system in the U.S., a 5.15R is one of the most difficult climbs. Murphy uses ropes for support that are laced into chocks — little aluminum notches spaced into crevices up the cliff face.

After taking the bar exam following his graduation from St. John's University School of Law in New York in 1993, Murphy was back climbing the next day. Asked whether his pursuits relieve the stress of complex legal work, he pauses.

"I don't think I ever reduce stress. I'm al-

ways wound up," he said. "I don't think it reduces stress, but maybe it does. I'm less happy if I don't do it."

Mountain climbing catapulted into public consciousness last year with the release of the film "127 Hours." Actor James Franco earned an Oscar nomination for his portrayal of climber Aron Ralston, who had to cut off his own lower right forearm after he became trapped for 127 hours under an 800-pound boulder during a climb in Utah in 2003.

Murphy said he has only fallen once, thankfully only five or six feet. He also says he has not

seen the movie, but not because he is avoiding it. "I don't pay much attention to TV and movies," he said.

Nor does he pause to snap photos during his adventures. Recording such wondrous sights would interfere with the experience. "My memories are in my mind," he said. ■

Do you – or a colleague in the legal profession – have an interesting second job, hobby or volunteer post? To suggest someone for an After Hours profile, contact mgrady@alm.com or psussman@alm.com.