

WYLIE AITKEN

In the early 1980's, attorney and political activist Wylie A. Aitken was approached by a number of influential people and asked to run for a seat on the County Board of Supervisors. It was an exciting prospect --- the son of New Deal Democrats had been active in politics since he was a teenager, campaigning on behalf of John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy and Jimmy Carter, among others. Never once, though, had he campaigned for himself.

Aitken gathered a small group of advisors and family members and retreated for the weekend to a beach cottage in San Clemente to consider the offer. On Saturday morning, he was eager with anticipation; by Sunday evening, he knew with certainty he would not run.

"I analyzed the requirements of the job and the effect that it would have on my family and decided that it was not for me," says Aitken, who specializes in cases involving wrongful death, insurance bad faith and major personal injuries.

Something else factored into his decision. "A friend said to me, 'Nobody remembers who the governors of Illinois were, but lots of people know who Clarence Darrow was,'" says Aitken, referring to the attorney famous for his defense of John Scopes, who sought to teach evolution to his high school students.

In other words, a lawyer could have just as much, if not more, of an effect on people's lives as a politician. And, that's certainly true for Aitken. As one of Orange County's most highly regarded trial attorneys, Aitken has won his share of David-versus-Goliath battles. He's gone up against State Farm Insurance, Federal Insurance Co., even Disneyland, and walked away with multimillion-dollar judgments for his clients. In one of his more publicized cases, he sued the county on behalf of Laura Small, a 5-year-old girl who was attacked by a mountain lion in Caspers Wilderness Park. Aitken convinced jurors that the county was negligent for not warning visitors of the threat of mountain lions in the park.

Taking a stand against what he perceives to be wrong is nothing new for Mr. Aitken. When his father moved the family from Kansas to Huntsville, Alabama, in the mid-1950's, Aitken was thrown into a culture that was in the throes of racial unrest. Unfamiliar with segregation, he questioned why he couldn't sit in the back of the school bus, in the section reserved for "coloreds." And when his classmates stood during the playing of "Dixie," he remained seated. "One of the football players threatened to beat me up. I told him I only stood for 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'"

A year later, his father landed a job in California. Aitken says he was thrilled to get out of the South but nonetheless values the time he spent there. "It sensitized me to the social issues that this country was facing, particularly how we were treating the black population."

Coming of age in the early '60s was a heady time. "It was the era of Bob Dylan and the whole belief system that we could change society," says Aitken, who turned to political activism as his avenue for change. While an undergraduate student he was president of Young Democrats for Kennedy and walked precincts for the 1960 presidential election. "It was very grass roots. We held pancake breakfasts and sold bumper stickers and raised about \$100." Three years after graduating from law school at Marquette University, Aitken was once again championing a Kennedy.

"Bobby Kennedy was a most amazing, fascinating and caring person, says Aitken, who headed up a local Lawyers for Bobby Kennedy fund-raising group during the 1968 presidential race. Aitken was also selected as a delegate at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago and, as such, he and his wife, Bette, were invited to hear Kennedy speak at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968 --- the night Kennedy was assassinated by Sirhan Sirhan.

"I was so devastated that I didn't have the heart to go to Chicago. I sent my alternate in my place. That could have been the end of my political involvement." Aitken says he retreated from politics for a while but "the thought occurred to me that Nixon could be president." About for days before the election, Aitken was back out walking precincts.

Aitken --- who is the chair of the Democratic Foundation of Orange County --- found another strong candidate to back in Democrat Loretta Sanchez. She sought Aitken's advice during her first run for congressional office, and he was by her side during her two re-election campaigns.

"Working on Loretta's campaigns has reaffirmed my commitment to politics and what people can do on a grassroots level."

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