

Heading east to Harvard led to golden opportunity to head west for attorney

By Brian Cox

Bill Murphy may be a lawyer for several reasons, but he is a California lawyer because of the Beach Boys.

He tells the story this way: On a cold, dreary, March day in Aurora, Ill. nearly 60 years ago, he was walking home from an outing with his Boy Scout troop when he first heard the Beach Boys' distinctive music blasting from a passing car. He'd never heard anything like it. He was smitten by the sound and the lyrics. As he discovered more of the West Coast band's iconic songs about sand, surfing, and muscle cars, he concluded that California was where he wanted to be when he grew up.

But first, rather than going west after graduating from Marmion Military Academy, Murphy headed east to follow in his father's footsteps and attend Harvard University.



Bill and his wife, Nancy, enjoy golfing at the Olympic Club in San Francisco.



His father, William Murphy, had left rather large footsteps. He was a graduate of Harvard Law and a well-known, highly respected trial attorney in Illinois for more than 65 years. In one significant case among many, he represented two Illinois Supreme Court justices during a famed 1969 inquiry that resulted in the justices resigning. In another case, his advocacy led to the abolition of sovereign immunity in Illinois and compensation for students badly burned in a school bus crash.

At Harvard, Murphy studied economics, though he thought for a time he might become a writer. Quick with a quip or an illustrative anecdote, he tried out for ("comped") and was elected to join the Harvard Lampoon, the oldest continuously published undergraduate humor magazine founded in 1876. As a member, he was involved in the Lampoon famously inviting the conservative actor John Wayne to Harvard for a roast in 1974. Wayne rode an armored personnel carrier through Harvard Square before being escorted to Lampoon Castle for dinner where he was inducted as an honorary member.

"I got to speak a little at the ceremony," recalls Murphy, "and got to be threatened by him physically at the following dinner."

Murphy graduated magna cum laude in 1975 and his thesis on the economics of franchising was published in *Southern Economic Journal* the following year.

It wasn't until his junior year at Harvard that he began to think, "maybe there's something in this law thing." He elected to go to Cornell Law School in Ithaca, N.Y., after graduation.

Despite having grown up knowing a host of lawyers in big firms from his father's career, Murphy was unclear when he started at Cornell what field of law he might want to practice. Early on, he developed an interest in antitrust work because it was the hot thing at the time, but he concluded it wasn't right for him.

"I think I changed my thinking when I realized that if you're a litigator in the antitrust field, you might get your first trial by the time you're 50 if you're lucky, and I really wanted to try cases," he says.

Murphy hadn't given up his dream of living in California, so he

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Bill's mother designed and built a house in 1968 on Dingle Peninsula on the southwest Atlantic Coast of Ireland; Bill and his family now stay at the house several times a year.

sought summer clerkships in Los Angeles. His father suggested he should look at Pillsbury, Madison & Sutro in San Francisco.

"There's a story about that," says Murphy, which is often the case for a natural storyteller.

At Pillsbury, he lucked out to interview with the only Cornell graduate working at the firm, Harvey Hinman, who would later go on to become vice president and general counsel at Chevron.

Back at Cornell at the start of his 2L, Murphy was sitting in the cafeteria when his civil procedure professor sat down beside him. He told Murphy that he had good connections in Chicago and could get him a clerkship "just by picking up the phone."

Murphy balked at the offer. He told the professor about his desire to work in California.

"So, you mean you would give up a sure thing in Chicago on the chance that you might get a job in California?" said the professor.

"I said, yeah, that's what I'm saying," relates Murphy.

The professor told Murphy he would call Harvey Hinman and recommend that he hire him.

"And that was it," says Murphy. "I never did any more interviewing after that."

After law school, Murphy fit in a clerkship with Judge Robert Kelleher of the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California. He tells the story of the judge asking him during the interview if he liked tennis. Murphy said, honestly, he wasn't a big fan, unaware that Kelleher was the captain of the victorious Davis Cup team in 1963 and the former president of the U.S. Lawn and Tennis Association who helped make open tennis a reality in 1968.

"He hired me anyway," says Murphy with a wry grin.

When the judicial clerkship was over, Murphy returned to Pillsbury in San Francisco, which at the time represented the oil refinery operator Chevron. Eager for trial experience, Murphy was plunged into trying unemployment claim cases.

"As a young associate, I got to do a lot of litigation and, in fact, I snuck my first bench trial out in federal court when I'd only been there a year and a half," recalls Murphy. "So, it turned out that labor and employment, which I'd enjoyed in law school but never really considered, was a lot of my practice."

After three years at Pillsbury, Murphy reached the decision to partner with Bill Dillingham – a colleague at the firm – to start their own law firm. He had recently seen a senior associate who hadn't made partner after seven years at Pillsbury and Murphy realized he wanted more control over his career.

"Bill Dillingham wanted to do it, and I was ready to do it because I'd seen what happened to the seven-year guy," says Murphy. "I just didn't want to put my faith in the hands of 400 people I didn't know."

They opened Dillingham & Murphy, LLP in 1982.

Murphy wasn't yet 30 and his first child was six weeks old.

The firm hit the ground running, though. Within the first week, Murphy's father had called with a referral to an insulation company that had just been hit with thousands of lawsuits over asbestos.

"And so we wound up getting into the asbestos business for the next two years," he says. "It was a nice way to get to know a lot of the trial lawyers in the San Francisco Bay area, because we were in every court."

The firm now has eight lawyers and four partners. Murphy says he doesn't hire new attorneys using any one standard. He is often guided by his gut and his lifelong relationships with other lawyers.

"My dad was a lawyer. Two of my uncles were lawyers. I've known a lot of lawyers all my life, and I know what the good ones sound like. I know what they look like, and I know what they talk like. So, I assess people from that perspective."

Murphy and his wife, Nancy, have been married 45 years and have three children, six granddaughters, and a new grandson. Nancy just recently retired from working in strategic planning and scenario planning.



A watercolor that Bill painted of his family's house in Ireland hangs on his office wall.

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Murphy enjoys painting watercolors when he gets the chance. Several of his paintings hang on his office walls, including one of the family home in Ireland that his mother designed and built in 1968 on Dingle Peninsula on the southwest Atlantic Coast.

“She thought she could get my father away for a solid three weeks or a month without him having to go back to work,” says Murphy.

As his father did, Murphy continues to love his work. He has been practicing now for more than 40 years, but he is still energized by trying a case.

“There’s something about just saying you’re wrong and I’m going to prove it,” he says. “It’s really a rush. I tell everybody it beats working. This is fun. I get to do this for a living and it’s tremendous.”



The Murphy clan gathered in 2023 to celebrate Bill's birthday at the family vacation home in Fahamore, County Kerry in Ireland. Pictured are (top, l-r) son-in-law Greg Sirois, son Matt Murphy, and son Will Murphy; (second from top) daughter Anne Sirois, holding 10-month-old granddaughter Josephine ("Joey"), daughter-in-law Nicolle Murphy (wife of Matt), Nicole Murphy (wife of Will), and granddaughter Bridget Murphy; (third row) Bill and his wife, Nancy; (bottom) granddaughters Allie Murphy, Quinn Murphy, Piper Murphy and Scarlett Murphy. A seventh grandchild, Samuel ("Sammy") Sirois, was born last October, so was not able to appear in the 2023 family photo.

Cutline