

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2017

In the Air

By Shane Nelson
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Longtime litigator Steven P. Ragland recognizes that juggling may not be the coolest pastime.

“It’s not exactly an activity that elevates your social stature,” the Kecker, Van Nest & Peters LLP partner conceded with a laugh. “It’s sort of nerdy and geeky. It’s great if you’re a clown, but otherwise it’s like, ‘Who’s that weird guy in the corner throwing clubs around?’”



Courtesy of Kecker, Van Nest & Peters LLP

In Recess

Ragland taught himself to juggle as a high school senior after learning a freestyle had picked up the skill. “I didn’t want him to be able to do anything I couldn’t,” Ragland confessed. “So I opened up a can of tennis balls and just sorted it out. ... You drop them a bunch and go running after them, but I just kept working at it.”

The future civil and criminal defense attorney didn’t stop with tennis balls and soon moved on to rings; juggling clubs, which look a lot like elongated bowling pins; and later the baton-spinning flair of devil sticks. Ragland said he waited a few years, however, before adding fire to his devil stick routine, noting that he’s never burned himself, but came close a few times.

Returning to Kentucky for that senior year of high school, after four years living with his family in Thailand, Ragland said learning different juggling techniques in the backyard of his Lexington home helped him cope with the frustrations of his new surroundings.

“All of a sudden, I was a fish out of water,” he recalled. “Juggling was a good way to deal with the stress of being the new kid in town.”

Ragland continued juggling while attending Lehigh University, but the skill became a bankable asset after he completed his undergraduate degree in

1992 and decided to take a part-time job as a clown in the Washington, D.C. area during summer breaks from teaching. Frequently performing at children’s parties, Ragland also delivered birthday greetings and balloons to adults and once made a clown call on Capitol Hill.

“It was for a staffer in a congress person’s office,” Ragland said, recalling the silliness of an elevator trip in full clown garb surrounded by young staffers

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acting as if they didn’t see him. “Then I went and gave the birthday person their balloons, sang out ‘Happy Birthday,’ performed a little magic trick, honked my bicycle horn and generally embarrassed everybody quite a bit.”

Ragland, who said he’d been really late for that particular delivery, noted that he made up some time by bribing a cop.

“I was able to double park in a loading zone,” he said, “because I gave a balloon poodle to a Capitol City police officer.”

Thomas K. Ragland, Steven’s older brother and an immigration attorney at Clark Hill PLC in D.C., still pokes fun at his sibling’s brief stint in entertainment.

“When he finished college, Steven did

a number of things,” Thomas Ragland said, “one of which was to get a clown degree, which of course made our parents very proud.”

Noting that his brother clowned as “Buttons,” Thomas Ragland said the alter ego came out of retirement for special occasions.

“He entertained at my son’s fifth birthday party,” he said. “And he was quite a hit.”

Ajay S. Krishnan, a Kecker, Van Nest & Peters partner who has worked with Ragland for nearly 12 years, has also seen the litigator entertain children as Buttons.

“He was in a full-on clown suit and doing a bunch of magic tricks and juggling,” Krishnan said. “It was for a group of 6-or 7-year-olds, and he had a very happy audience. It was impressive.”

Krishnan, who juggles a little himself but described Ragland as a great juggler, has seen his friend throw up four or even five objects while working in his office.

“He doesn’t really do it with the door open,” Krishnan said with a laugh. “But

I’ve seen him juggle three balls and a banana.”

Today, juggling remains an occasional escape for Ragland, who said he’ll turn to the pursuit when he’s looking to clear his mind, after crafting an argument, for example, or perhaps while working on a brief.

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A married father of a 13-year-old daughter and an 11-year-old son, Ragland said he used to juggle more frequently for his kids, entertaining at birthday parties and wowing his children’s friends with impromptu demonstrations. Those are fewer and further between these days, but occasionally Ragland will be called into action.

“Usually, it’s not well thought out,” he said of juggling at home today. “It might be an apple, an orange, and a screwdriver — whatever is around.”

Cindy McAdam, a partner and general counsel for Ribbit Capital, hired Ragland three years ago to handle a multiple jurisdiction litigation matter. And while she only recently learned of his literal juggling exploits, McAdam didn’t seem too surprised.

“He’s extremely bright and very quick on his feet,” she said. “I really didn’t know about his juggling, but it makes so much sense now. He’s terrific at taking all these different threads and pursuing them while keeping everything in motion at the same time and never foreclosing any one avenue.”

It turns out Ragland’s background performing as a clown also provided meaningful training for his career as a litigator.

“There’s a bit of fearlessness required for both,” he explained. “And it helped me learn to command a room and command attention, which is important whether you’re arguing to a judge or a jury.”

According to Krishnan, Ragland also hasn’t forgotten how to make people laugh.

“Steven has fantastic timing,” Krishnan said. “I’ve seen him in the middle of an argument drop a joke at exactly the right moment and just have an entire courtroom roaring.”