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RODNEY NELSON GOES VERTICAL

Former U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas inspired Yakima attorney Rodney Nelson, 54 (with Abeyta Nelson), to become a lawyer. But Douglas – who also hailed from Yakima – inspired Nelson in other ways. “The first thing I remember about Douglas was a short story we read in elementary school about a climb he and a friend did,” recalls Nelson.

That climb, of Kloochman Rock outside Yakima, is recounted in Douglas’s book *Of Men and Mountains*. Nelson, who grew up poor in Selah, north of Yakima, was primed for inspiration. He was already an avid camper, and by the time he was 13, he was beginning his assault on the big mountains of the Northwest.

“My first real climb was an unsuccessful attempt on Glacier Peak in 1967, when I was 13,” Nelson says. “I had my dad’s old boots on, but I had to turn around an hour from the summit.” Even though the climb was a bust, it was love at first step. “I was in a very small town,” he says. “I wasn’t particularly good at other sports, but climbing was a wonderful undertaking.” He went on to climb Kloochman Rock, and eventually outgrew the Cascade peaks. I’m driven by the sport. As you get older and better, you try bigger and more technical climbs.”

In 1984, Nelson traveled to Peru to climb Huascarán, at 22,205 feet the fourth-highest peak in the Andes. It was the first time Nelson had been over 15,000 feet, and he had intense altitude-related headaches. “I was used to running up things, so it was kind of a shock,” he says. “Big mountains teach you patience.” This one also taught him humility. After a tough climb, a snowstorm, and a rugged night in an open bivouac at 20,000 feet, Nelson’s party was joined by a lone climber descending the mountain. “He told us his partner had fallen to his death. It was an eye-opener.”

The encounter didn’t curb Nelson’s enthusiasm, however. He climbed El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, a three-day vertical climb requiring nights tethered to ledges clinging to the sheer 3,000-foot wall. He headed to the Pamirs in Tajikistan to summit a 23,000-foot peak, then climbed Cho Oyo, the “Turquoise Goddess,” in the Himalayas. After a month of lousy weather, Nelson found himself atop the peak on a calm, sunny day.

What ran through his mind, sitting on the roof of the world? “Getting down safely,” he admits. “Standing on top of the mountain is not what it’s about for me. Most of the summits I’ve been on, I think about getting down.”

Everest is not in the cards. Nelson says the rigors of that kind of climbing demand too much time and take too large a toll on one’s body. He has, though, an ever-lengthening “tick list” of climbs he wants to make. It includes the Tetons, the Bugaboos in Canada, and Torres del Paine in Chile. “When I climb, I’m not a lawyer – I’m a climber. And climbing makes me a better lawyer because it clears my head,” he says. He adds that the perspective he gains from climbing is invaluable. “Because I’ve lived through situations that I didn’t think I was going to, I know I’m not going to lose my life in a lawsuit.”

