

Success with style: Defense attorney known for his skill in the courtroom and flashy clothes

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AT THE Marin County Hall of Justice, the dress code among lawyers generally ranges from black to dark blue to brown, although some attorneys, in an occasional flamboyant gesture, wear charcoal gray.

And then there's Jon Rankin.

For Rankin, a 50-year-old attorney from Tiburon, the question is not whether to wear black or gray, it's which tie to wear with his Hawaiian shirt, Panama hat, Western duster and gold medallions.

"They can't legislate taste," he says. "It has to be a solid-colored tie, though. Otherwise it just clashes."

With his sartorial panache, his bling-bling and his 1958 tail-finned Cadillac, Rankin looks more like a bail bondsman from an Elmore Leonard novel than a lawyer in one the wealthiest counties in the United States.

In spite of his unorthodox appearance, however, Rankin has cultivated a reputation as a highly effective lawyer, particularly in criminal defense.

"He's a fantastic trial attorney who has a lot of success in the courtroom," says Deputy District Attorney Paul Haakenson. "I appear on the opposite side of the courtroom from him quite often, and he's

one of the most honest and ethical attorneys I know, and always fights hard for his clients and achieves good results.

"For Jon's sake, it's a good thing they don't have metal detectors outside the courtroom, because it would take him an hour and a half to get through the door, once he gets his jewelry off."

Jon Philip Rankin was

born at Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield and raised primarily in Los Angeles. His father, Jack, was a phone technician, and his mother, Phyllis, a homemaker. Jon was the oldest of five siblings.

In 1968, the family moved to Petaluma, and Rankin went to Petaluma High School. Most of the family still lives in Sonoma County.

"My father was a native Angelino, and the place just changed to the point where he didn't want to raise his children there," Rankin says.

Rankin's sister, Joy Reynolds, says her brother did not begin to show the signs of his current flair until after college. As a child, he was "very short and kind of a dork," Reynolds says.

"He had big, thick, dark glasses in high school," says Reynolds, 47, of Petaluma. "He was in a play, and at the end of a scene all the guys picked up the girls and carried them off - and the girl picked him up because he was so little.

"He grew quite a bit after high school," she says of her brother, who is about 5 feet, 10 inches tall.

Rankin went to undergraduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles, then graduated

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from the Southwestern University School of Law in Los Angeles. He joined the state bar in 1982.

Rankin says he wanted to become a lawyer at an early age, although he isn't sure why.

"It's the only thing I ever wanted to do as long as I have memories," he says. "I just lucked out that I'm halfway decent at it. ... My mother just says I always like to argue with people."

High-profile cases

As a lawyer in Marin, Rankin has a knack for catching interesting cases, both as a court-appointed defense attorney and as a civil attorney.

In 2001, he represented a former Kosovo war refugee and freedom fighter who fled the Serbs and settled in Corte Madera with his family. The man was charged with 18 counts of domestic violence, child endangerment and related violations; Rankin argued that his client suffered post-traumatic stress from the war. Prosecutors eventually dropped 15 charges in a plea bargain negotiated by Rankin.

Last year, Rankin won an acquittal for an 18-year-old Marin City man charged with attempted murder in the shooting of a 13-year-old Marin City boy.

Also last year, Rankin won an acquittal on attempted murder charges for a San Rafael man who struck a rival with his car in Marin City. Rankin's client was convicted of assault with a deadly weapon instead, receiving a suspended sentence and probation.

And this year, Rankin took on the Catholic Church, suing the Archdiocese of San Francisco on behalf of two brothers who claim their father was buried in the wrong spot at Mount Olivet Catholic Cemetery in

Terra Linda. The case is pending.

Marin Superior Court Judge Verna Adams says she has "the highest regard" for Rankin and that she pays no attention to his unusual dress code.

"He is a very bright attorney," Adams says. "He represents his clients vigorously and well. I think he's a wonderful lawyer. ... It's what people say and do in court that's important."

Defense attorney Douglas Horngrad, who is on the board of Alternate Defenders Inc., a San Rafael organization that provides contract attorneys for some defendants, says Rankin is a previous recipient of ADI's "Trial Lawyer of the Year" award.

"He's a very effective and gifted trial attorney," says Horngrad, who lives in Mill Valley. "He gets great trial results; I think he gets the best trial results around in the county. ... He's a very, very good attorney."

Client's unusual offer

Like many defense attorneys, Rankin has encountered his share of seedy characters in the line of duty. In one case, a client was so grateful that he wrote a letter offering to get Rankin "the best Colombian cocaine he could find" once he was released from custody, Rankin says.

"I told him he probably shouldn't write things like that from the jail," Rankin says.

In another case, Rankin represented a suspect in a firearms case and not only got him acquitted but forced authorities to return the gun. But the client threatened Rankin in his office because the gun wasn't being sent back fast enough.

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Rankin kept his finger near a "panic button" behind his desk, but the gun owner eventually left without incident. Rankin says he's extremely reluctant to hit the button on a defendant because "it's just bad for business if you're calling the cops on your own client."

Besides, he wasn't overly frightened.

"All I could think of was, I noticed that my socks don't match my tie," he says.

Life in politics

Rankin's career hasn't been strictly limited to the law - he has also tried politics.

In 1987, he served as co-chairman of the Committee Against Measure F, a Tiburon tax measure that would have helped pay the town's legal fees from litigation over building moratoriums. Rankin, likening the measure to a "head tax," succeeded in defeating the measure.

The following year, Rankin ran for the Tiburon Town Council, losing in a three-way race for two seats. Rankin, a Democrat, says he has no interest in running for office again.

"I don't believe that people should expose their lives as much as is necessary to be under public scrutiny these days," he says. "I'm uncomfortable with the level of scrutiny that politicians receive."

In addition to dabbling in politics, Rankin has been dabbling in writing. For the past 10 years, he has worked on a semi-autobiographical novel about a private detective. He says the book, which draws partly upon his own cases and experiences, is

about three-quarters finished.

"I'll write really intensely for a while, and then I won't touch it for a year," he says. "I think you can exercise your mind and expand your life through writing."

Rankin has been married for almost three years to Bethany Rankin, a banquet director who works from home. They have a 3-month-old son, Jaden Philip.

Buys at thrift stores

Rankin likes to spend time in Palm Springs, where he plays golf and hits the thrift stores. He prefers to wear second-hand suits and once found a \$1,000 Brioni suit on sale for \$100 at a Palm Springs thrift shop.

"The rich people in Palm Springs die with really nice stuff," he says. "I just prefer someone else to take the depreciation on stuff like that."

"Now, shoes, on the other hand - I'll spend real money for shoes," adds Rankin, whose wardrobe includes shoes by Bruno Magli, Lorenzo Banfi, Valentino and Magnanni. He buys his shoes new.

Besides shoes, Rankin has a weakness for pink flamingoes. He always travels with four plastic pink flamingoes in his '58 Caddy, and he boasts a collection of flamingo images at his Tiburon law office.

Why flamingoes?

"They're tropical," he says, "and real men wear pink."

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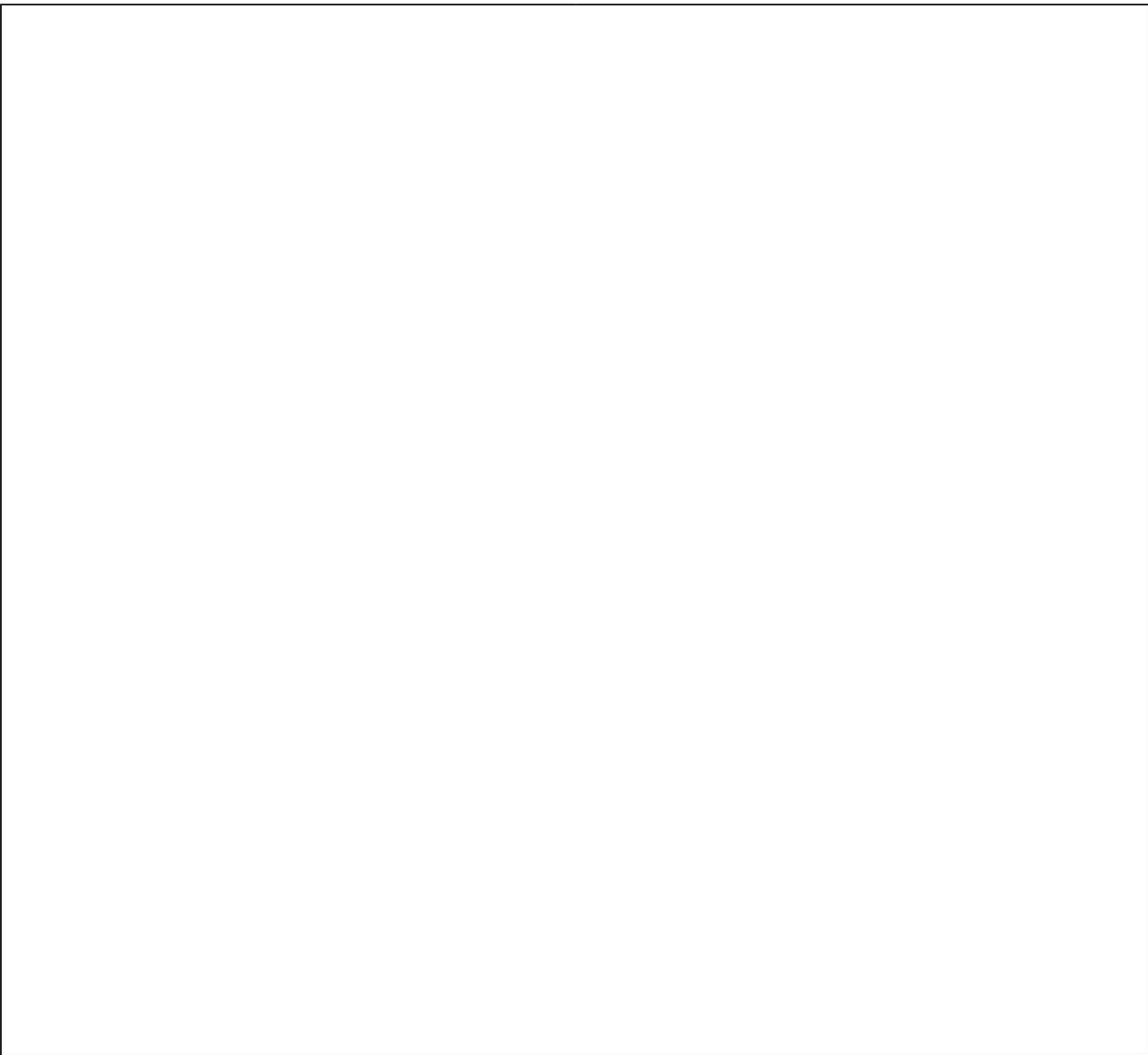
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