

When summer comes to Arizona, the inevitable aroma of forest fires creates apprehension, and since 2013 it also carries with it a sense of dread. For it was in that year that 19 firefighters were trapped by the Yarnell Hill Fire and perished in a small valley where they had taken shelter. Throughout the state and the nation, people mourned the tragedy.

In Northern Arizona, though, the events inevitably took on a far more personal cast. Many people in the beautiful mountain communities knew someone who died, or knew someone who knew someone. And even for those residents who were farther removed, many had family or friends who fought fires. And everyone recognized the courage of those who placed themselves between raging flames and the thousands of souls who lived alongside sometimes vengeful wilderness. In June 2013, that courage was made manifest.

So widespread was the grief that about \$8 million was donated on behalf of the surviving families. But like the misfortune that necessitated it, the donations turned the conversation from white-hot inferno to decidedly cooler topics—like division, distribution, and legal and tax consequences. All would have to be resolved before families could be assisted.

That need led firefighters associations in Prescott and Phoenix to create a board to oversee the relief fund.

Alex Vakula, a Prescott attorney, was appointed one of the board's three advisory members. He says he was privileged to provide insight and assistance to the Granite Mountain 19 Distribution Advisory Committee—and remains in awe of the Hotshots who lost their lives.

But how did a Michigan boy make his way west and end up in a rural community where he is a respected attorney and trusted community counselor—and the new President of the State Bar of Arizona? His path to Prescott may have launched on a literal starting line—on a backyard dragstrip.

Vakula is proud of his family's immigrant history, and their American chapter began in

the 1920s, when his great-grandfather and his best friend moved from Russia to Michigan. (That friend, Alexander Gecko, is Alex's namesake.) Even then, Vakulas made their living at ground level.

He says, "They literally dug the basements for the skyscrapers and the hotels in downtown Detroit." Eventually, the men saved up enough money to buy a farm. "Then they sent back to Russia for the families, and that was the farm I grew up on."

That was in Lapeer, Michigan, a small city about 60 miles north of Detroit. It sits on the now-notorious Flint River, and though it's the county seat, it's never been a large town. In the 1970s, when the Vakula family headed west, its population was about 6,000 people. Maybe that's why entrepreneurs could more easily start a new business—even a unique one.

The Vakulas had been longtime farmers, but when Alex's father and uncle decided to make a change, they became butchers, eventually owning three shops in the state. But even while they found success in that field, their gaze settled on the now-unused fields outside the family home. That's when they envisioned the crop furrows flattened and paved into an auto dragstrip. The immigrant family—and motor sports—were about to be transformed again.

Still operating today, the Lapeer Dragway is a quarter-mile asphalt track that has showcased the driving talents of the greats and not-so-greats ever since the two men built it in 1968.

Vakula says, "So we had a raceway in our backyard, and Sundays we'd have the top field dragsters come out. It was a great experience growing up. We just had a blast."

It may be safe to say that Alex Vakula—and his brother Nick—may be the only two Arizona lawyers whose family has been inducted into the Michigan Motor Sports Hall of Fame. The 2012 honor recognized the impact of that unique family business. And that high-horsepower line of work played a role in the sons' choice of careers—in an odd way.

Asked whether a family dragstrip sinks deep into a son's career DNA, the successful lawyer smiles. Turns out, the answer is yes, but not as you might expect.

"My dad got sued twice, and he was terrified." A high-stakes profession brought legal issues to the family's doorstep.

In the first case, a driver died when his car rolled. Sued in the late 1960s on a claim that the track was flawed, his dad and uncle hired an attorney. By incredible good fortune, early technology helped the family avoid liability.

"It just so happened that someone was filming, which back in that day was pretty rare."

The video showed that the driver's vision was obscured by oil that shot out when his engine's oil-cap came off. He could be seen wiping the oil off his goggles when he tragically rolled his car.

Vakula says, "It would have been a lot scarier if we didn't have that video"—and a diligent attorney.

A second lawsuit was a products liability matter regarding the butcher business. His dad and uncle had sold a meat grinder with which a worker was eventually injured. Co-defendants with the grinder manufacturer, the family—who ultimately prevailed—spent more time with lawyers in Michigan courtrooms.

"I saw a pretty good trial when I was in fifth or sixth grade," the 56-year-old Vakula recalls—which is how he and his brother began thinking about law.

"My dad always had a deep respect for his lawyer. I remember I would leave his shop—it was kind of like Prescott, right in the square. We'd be leaving his shop at 5:00 or 6:00 at night, and look up there and the light in his lawyer's office was still on. He was always very impressed with his lawyer's work ethic. So he always had a high regard for lawyers."

Taking hard-earned lessons from his family's experience, Vakula urges young lawyers to learn more about the business side of the legal profession.



A man with dark hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a blue patterned shirt, stands on a balcony. He is leaning against a white pillar with green accents. In the background, there are green trees, a white building with columns, and a prominent mountain peak under a blue sky.

# Riding the Trail

New State Bar President  
Alex Vakula



## New State Bar President Alex Vakula

“As one of my old partners used to say, if you can’t keep the lights on, you can’t help anyone.”

Today, like their father and uncle before them, the two brothers are in the same firm and share offices—though with different clients and practice areas. The work allows Alex to travel between his home in Prescott and their Valley office.

The oldest of the three brothers, Nick Vakula also remembers watching the family courtroom trials. And he says their grandfather always pointed out that their cousin and Alex “are good talkers, and they should be lawyers.”

“I don’t know anybody who doesn’t like Alex,” Nick says. “He’s an Everyman kind of guy.”

Nick predicts his little brother will make an excellent Bar President.

“He’s willing to take on a fight when it’s needed,” he says. “He’s not afraid to take on hard work and make hard choices that need to be made.”

Today, Alex Vakula’s practice is primarily in real estate. Along the way, he’s gotten to represent a solar-power company, a horse-racing track, and a woman defrauded in a securities matter that settled for \$4.2 million. He’s even represented a property owner who wanted to create a private shooting range on his 300 acres; in the fight over zoning issues vs. the Second Amendment, Vakula’s client prevailed.

He says, “I’ve never had a day where I go, ‘Well, this is getting boring.’”

The family’s march west occurred in 1973, when Vakula was about 12 years old. His father’s polio—which he had contracted at age 18—grew worse with the cold Midwestern winters, and so they arrived in Phoenix, drawn by the climate and the business opportunities.

Vakula smiles as he recalls the trip, an adventure for a preteen boy.

“We traveled across the country kind of like the movie *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*. We had station wagons and U-Haul trucks, with stuff strapped to the top of them.”

He also remembers his father’s strength even when in pain. “He was disabled from the time he was 18, but never missed a day of work.” That was true at the dragstrip—not exactly a desk job—or the butcher shop, where he would carry sides of beef

on his back.

Vakula’s outlook also is shaped by his own experience of physical disability. That arose from serious burns he received when he about 3 years old. Caused by an overturned pot on the stove, those burns afflicted his face, chest and arms. They led to the arduous and painful process of skin grafts and hospital stays that could last weeks. Until age 11, he had to return for additional grafts and surgery. The hospital was hours from his home, and his parents would visit when they were able, but a burn center can be a solitary place for a young child.

The normally ebullient attorney speaks quietly about “those formative years when people are judging each other” and kids routinely get teased.

“I think that—and my dad’s polio—shaped me in a lot of ways to just be a little more compassionate.”

Taking time with people and being compassionate are often seen as hallmarks of a rural law practice. If that’s the case, Vakula landed in the right place.

“I think one of the main reasons I’m up in Prescott,” Vakula admits, “is that it’s got a courthouse almost identical to one in Michigan. The same kind of square, with businesses all around it. A hometown feel.”

Prescott’s Courthouse Square seems to never be far from his mind—the physical place takes up serious psychic real estate. Like his childhood Lapeer, the town’s streets, buildings, and residents offer shared values and lifelong lessons. He and his wife Maureen have been pleased this was the place they raised their sons—Ben, Chris, and Nick, who are 25, 20, and 13, respectively. But even more than that, Vakula has adopted the town as it has adopted him.

“I love it. We moved up there for the ambiance and the weather, but after you get to know the people up there, some of the relationships are just so deep. For instance, when one of our sons was born, we really didn’t know that many people. But for two weeks, someone would bring us dinner every night—a different family. This was not people from our church; these were just people in town about our age. We were kind of blown away.”

In the square, the courthouse itself—which is 101 years old this year—narrowly avoided being closed as a working courthouse a few years ago. And when that risk

arose, Vakula decided to step up.

The government goal had been to close the courthouse and build an all-in-one justice center, to include police and jail services. The historic building would become a museum. But the elimination of the heart of the square rankled.

“Many people bitched and moaned,” says Prescott attorney Mike Murphy, a past State Bar President. “But Alex and another attorney, Chris Kottke, took the lead.” They organized opposition and educated elected officials.

If they went forward with the closure, Murphy says, “The Board of Supervisors soon learned they’d have a fight on their hands.”

The advocacy was successful. The courthouse remains open.

This gets at a pet peeve of Vakula’s, which he’s called spectator complaining.

“I’ve coached 30 youth sports team,” says Vakula, “and I can’t tell you how many times a parent on the sidelines complained about this or that. I’ve literally gone over and said, ‘We need more umpires and referees – would you be interested in volunteering?’”

He smiles. “Sometimes they join.”

Yavapai County Assessor Judd Simmons has known Vakula about 15 years, and says his friend “fit in to Prescott right away, and has been a huge advocate for our community.”

“Alex has got a real calm demeanor,” Simmons says. “He can handle any kind of adversarial situation.”

Like others, Simmons admires Vakula’s “great smile”—which may be more impressive considering his love of mountain biking and his “knack for getting flat tires.”

In what may be a required skill for bar leaders, Simmons says his friend “has gotten much better with the patch kit.”

A shared love for biking permeates the comments of many Vakula colleagues.

Former Bar President Bob Schmitt jokes about Prescott’s “Team Downhill” biking club, of which Vakula is considered a junior varsity member—given most members are 15 years older than him. Another jokes that a mountain ride alongside Vakula may be a four-hour ordeal on steep terrain, combined with ample conversation with the very social lawyer.

Demonstrating that thick skin is required to ride in Northern Arizona, friends have some gentle fun at the expense of Vakula’s misfortune.

“He’s ridden very difficult trails,” says Murphy, “but he broke his wrist”—reportedly

## New State Bar President Alex Vakula

in 13 places—“when he tried to go over a curb.”

Schmitt laughs and says, “Going over boulders is no problem for Alex, but a curb —”

Adding a little-known fact about Vakula and his running history, Murphy mentions Alex has received numerous dog bites.

“Alex has an ass that is filet mignon to dogs”—which may be a first for a Bar President.

Prescott’s Nob Hill, up the ridge from Courthouse Square, is the site of numerous historic buildings. That includes the 1894 Marks house, originally owned by a liquor distributor, that was Vakula’s law office and now is his home.

“They were going to build the state capitol on that hill,” says Vakula. Ultimately the state sold the property. “The Goldwaters got the top lot because they were high class, and Jake Marks got the lowest lot because he dealt in liquor. But I think we got the better view.”

Schmitt says he and Murphy are proud to have recruited Vakula to take on leadership roles, whether in Prescott or the State Bar.

“We think it’s important to remember that you owe a lot to your profession,” says Schmitt. “You’re a steward,” and giving back is part of the bargain.

Both men know the toll a presidency can take on a law practice, but they say the Prescott legal community supports Vakula.

“I’ve offered to make court appearances for him,” says Murphy, “and I know others have done the same.” He says he knows dozens of lawyers who are willing to help.

One notable leadership moment came at the ASU Alumni Association, where Vakula’s wife formerly worked. Chatting in the mid-1990s with then-director Don Dotts about the plan to build a new alumni center, Vakula said, “Why don’t you just renovate Old Main? It’s a beautiful building.” That offhand



Alex Vakula stands in front of his Prescott home, the 1894 Marks House.

remark got Vakula named to the renovation committee—and his efforts eventually won him a cherished and rare lithograph of the historic 1898 structure.

Stewardship is what comes to mind when Gerald Szostak thinks of Vakula—that, and a sense of humor.

Szostak is the Executive Director of the Boys & Girls Club of Central Arizona, on whose board Vakula sits. He calls the attorney a great contributor.

“He brings friends into the club, he knows our programs, and he keeps active. When I mention Alex’s name, people often say, ‘I love that guy.’”

Vakula assisted on a first-time effort for the organization—a dancing with the stars-type fundraiser. It raised \$131,000, which “exceeded all expectations,” says Szostak.

He adds that Vakula makes being on the board enjoyable. “He can be a serious guy,” Szostak says, “but it’s guys like Alex who

know that we run on youth development, so this should be fun.”

“Hilarious” is one of the first words Court of Appeals Judge Jennifer Campbell uses to describe the new Bar President. In 2004, her first Arizona job was as an associate at Vakula & Kottke, and in her interview she fielded a query that said a lot about the partners and Prescott: “Do you play softball?” Legal acumen—and a competitive on-field spirit—made it a good match.

Vakula “has no bluster and is always reasonable,” Campbell says. “He’s ethical and kind, a consensus builder, and he is an excellent draftsman. My written product is so much better because of him.”

Simply put, “Alex is the big brother I never had.”

Judge Randall Howe, also on the Arizona Court of Appeals, looks forward to Vakula’s leadership as Bar President. Back in 1986, they worked together as law clerks at the Greyhound Corporation (which later became Dial and then Viad).

“People always liked Alex,” Howe says. “He’s a really friendly guy. I think he is well positioned to

help the Bar.”

As the summer reaches its midpoint, rural areas remain on edge as fires in the north and south threaten communities. And those fires remind Schmitt of the way Vakula refused to be a spectator when grieving Hotshot families needed help.

“Everybody wanted to do something,” says Schmitt, “but there was chaos. Alex jumped in and brought some order.”

The disjointed efforts meant money was going in multiple directions, and the public grew unsure about which charities they could trust. A process had to be created, quickly.

Among other efforts, Vakula reached out to Ken Feinberg, famous for devising donation systems in the wake of tragedies such as the attacks of September 11, 2001. The resulting Arizona system led to widespread praise that the families were treated equitably.

“Nobody asked Alex to do it,” Judge Campbell adds. “He just did it.” **AF**