

**J. Scott Alexander**  
is the Managing Partner  
at Murphy Austin  
Adams Schoenfeld LLP.  
He can be contacted  
at [salexander@  
murphyaustin.com](mailto:salexander@murphyaustin.com).

# RUSSELL AUSTIN

## The SCBA's 2017 Distinguished Attorney

by J. Scott Alexander

**T**he SCBA has selected **Russell J. Austin** as its 2017 Distinguished Attorney of the Year.

A third-generation native Californian, born and raised in the Los Angeles area, Russell J. Austin earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in history at UC Santa Barbara. In his senior year, he pursued a year-long study-abroad program at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, where he met his wife, Elizabeth (then an exchange student from UC Berkeley). During that year abroad, the two of them discovered their shared interest in travel and hiking across historical landscapes. In 1982, Russell and Elizabeth moved to Sacramento when Russell was asked to help open a local office of Marron Reid, LLP, a San Francisco law firm he joined following his graduation from UC Berkeley School of Law in 1980.

Being new to the Sacramento area, Russell's first forays into community service included adjunct teaching at Pacific McGeorge and serving on the Board of Directors of the Barristers' Club, formerly known as the Sacramento Young Lawyers Association. While



**Russell Austin, 1962**

...serving on that board, Russell embraced the opportunity to serve on the Voluntary Legal Services Program (VLSP) Committee. From 1988 to 1992, Russell served as Chair of VLSP, and from 1989 to 1993, as President of Legal Services of Northern California (LSNC). From then to 1997, Russell served on the California State Bar Legal Services Trust Fund Commission.

During Russell's term as VLSP's President, VLSP faced a funding crisis. In response, Russell organized and led a task force comprised of SCBA and VLSP Committee members. The report of that task force laid out several key findings in support of a proposed allocation of membership dues to VLSP. Since its inception in 1992, that allocation has generated approximately \$876,000 in revenue in support of *pro bono* legal services to indigent county residents.

When asked about what factors influenced his decision to focus his community service on programs that benefit the poor, Russell said, "I was fortunate to have had an outstanding legal education at a great public university that provided the foundation for my belief in the role and responsibilities of attorneys, not just with clients but also with the communities they serve. That core

belief was both reinforced and deepened by the opportunity to chair the boards of both LSNC and VLSP, and to help those programs expand their abilities to serve their clients and improve access to justice for those without the means or resources to fend for themselves in the legal system."

**Gary Smith**, Executive Director of both LSNC and VLSP since 1999, said, "Russell's commitment to the highest *pro bono* ideals of our profession, and to the larger cause of 'equal access to justice,' is heartfelt and genuine. He has been a staunch supporter of both LSNC and VLSP, personally and professionally, and I am privileged to have been able to work with him for so many years on these critical issues in our community. Over the decades, when we have needed the support of the local legal community to fend off political attacks on our work and our funding, Russell has always been one of the first to respond."

For this work, Russell received a President's Pro Bono Service award from the California Bar in 1992, a *Pro Bono Publico* award from the American Bar Association in 1993, and was recognized by the SCBA as its Humanitarian of the Year in 1994. During the 1990's, Russell was also active with Business Volunteers for the Arts, as a volunteer, Board Member and Board Chair, and

was named BVA's Volunteer of the Year in 1991.

Throughout his career, Russell's law practice has focused on commercial real estate, business, and corporate law. He counsels owners, developers, lenders, conservation organizations, nonprofits,



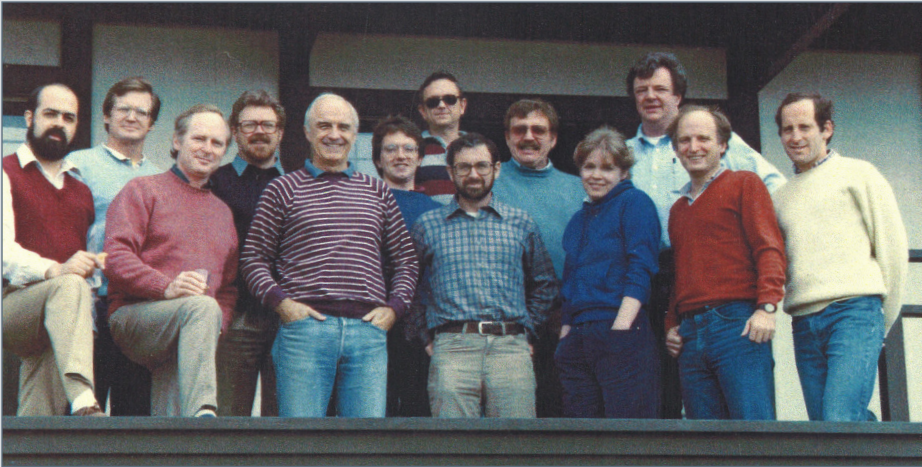
**Russell Austin, UC Berkeley, School of Law, 1980**

and public agencies in real property, business formations, financings, and conservation easements. While he has represented many high-profile clients and earned numerous awards and honors over the years, Russell firmly believes that attorneys do their best work when they build and sustain the trust and confidence of their clients, and most importantly, "do so with integrity and authenticity."

Upon learning that Russell had



**Elizabeth Austin and Russell Austin, UC Berkeley, School of Law, 1980**



Russell Austin, far left, with Marron Reid, LLP partners, 1985

been selected for this award, Sacramento County Superior Court Judge **James M. Mize** said, “The term ‘Distinguished Attorney’ was invented to describe Russell Austin. His successes, his competence, his contributions to the law by themselves are outstanding, and yet his humanitarian service to the community dwarfs even his impeccable professional credentials. He is the attorney you want at your side in a tough negotiation or in a soup kitchen. This award has just increased in stature and gravitas by the addition of Russell to its rolls.”

Since helping to found *Murphy Austin* in 1999, including serving as its initial Managing Partner, Russell’s philanthropic vision has played an important role in shaping the firm’s culture and mission. Always a leader by example, Russell has continued to serve the community in a variety of capacities, including in both local and regional programs and initiatives.

In 2001, Russell was honored as the Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce’s Volunteer of the Year for his service as a board member. As the organization’s Vice President of Community Development, he spearheaded a Regional Arts Strategic Plan. He also served on task forces analyzing the Port of Sacramento, the financing plan for the River Cats baseball stadium, and the development of a new sports/en-

tertainment facility for the Sacramento Kings, and led “issues” teams in numerous “Cap to Cap” and study mission visits to other cities.

During his term on the Crocker Art Museum’s Board of Directors from 2001 to 2008, Russell chaired the Building and Grounds Committee and directed the negotiation and documentation of the design and construction agreements for the Museum’s \$100 million-dollar expansion. “Russell is one of those people you want in your corner,” said **Lial Jones**, the Mort & Marcy Friedman Director & CEO of the Crocker Art Museum. “He is thoughtful, a brilliant strategist and a marvelous negotiator.

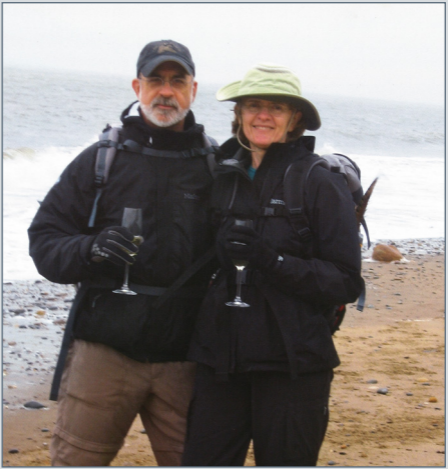
When faced with a challenge, nothing can stop Russell from finding a solution and he makes a difference in Sacramento to every day.”

With the benefit of his work on a wide range of conservation projects, Russell served on the Board of Directors of the Sacramento Valley Conservancy from 2002 to 2010, including serving as President from 2004 to 2006. Key projects during his tenure included preserving the natural habitat located in the Cosumnes River/Deer Creek Watershed region, and acquiring the Elkhorn Basin Ranch in Yolo County in partnership with Yolo Land Trust. “Russell crafted the partnership that allowed the Sacramento Valley Conservancy to protect the over 4,000-acre Deer Creek Hills Preserve for future generations, an untold gift to Sacramento’s quality of life. So far, thousands of families and friends have enjoyed hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding in this blue oak woodland,” said Sacramento Valley Conservancy Executive Director, **Aimee Rutledge**.

Since 2010, Russell has led Murphy Austin’s *pro bono* support of Saint John’s Program for Real Change (formerly known as St. John’s Shelter for Women and Children), the largest homeless



Russell and Elizabeth Austin and family at their son’s wedding, 2017



**Russell Austin and Elizabeth Austin completing the “Coast to Coast” walk in England, 2007**

shelter in Sacramento County, providing counseling, education, and work training programs supporting homeless mothers with children. The work has been instrumental in increasing Saint John’s ability to serve homeless populations in the region, including through the support of such social enterprise programs as Plates Café, First Steps Child Development Center, and Plates-2go, which have helped Saint John’s expand its capacity by 170% over the past four years. “Russell not only provides us with legal counsel, but he is also a great strategist, an objective listener, and a thoughtful counselor,” said Saint John’s CEO, **Michele Steeb**. “Over the years, Russell has consistently looked out for the best interests of our organization and our community. We are eternally grateful to him for his support.”

Summing up Russell’s many contributions, Murphy Austin partner **Blair Shahbazian** expressed, “It is fitting that Russell has been selected for this honor at a time when the Sacramento legal services community is reflecting on and celebrating SCBA’s 100-year anniversary. Russell’s commitment to community is exemplary. The positive impact of his service will be felt in our region for generations to come.” 