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Portland attorneys take on a case of conscience

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For most people, professional mid-life crises come at exactly that time: mid-life.

So maybe Chris Winter and Ralph Bloemers were a little ahead of the rest of their age group when the two Portland attorneys, then in their late 20s, began questioning the direction in which their still-young careers were headed.

At the time, and by most standards, Winter and Bloemers were living a law school graduate's dream. Out in the working world since 1998, they were associates at Stoel Rives, one of the largest law firms in Portland.

Their paychecks were big. Their offices were cushy. They were making money for an impressive list of clients, Winter representing companies on environmental issues and Bloemers handling corporate securities and finance issues for tech start-up firms.

But for all their surface successes, the two lawyers couldn't escape the nagging feeling that they were moving too far away from the reasons that had led them to law in the first place.

"We both went into law school with an interest in environmental issues," Winter said. "We had a passion for activism, for protecting natural resources."

Taking mutual deep breaths, Winter and Bloemers plunged in 2001, cutting their financial safety nets with Stoel Rives and striking out on their own to form Cascade Resources Advocacy Group, a nonprofit organization that offers legal assistance related to public interest environmental issues.

Now instead of representing clients with abundant resources in company-to-company disputes, Winter and Bloemers stand up for the interests of

grass roots organizations and citizen groups that come knocking on the door armed with more environmental concern than financial backing.

Sometimes they find themselves battling against the companies they once represented. More often, however, they face off against government agencies, which have proven to be unrelenting adversaries.

“They flood you in paperwork,” Winter said. “They think you’ll fold.”

But he and Bloemers aren’t even close to giving up. Or giving in.

While nonprofit, law-focused public interest organizations, especially those focusing on environmental issues, aren’t necessarily abundant in Oregon, they aren’t unheard of. There’s the Eugene-based Western Environmental Law Center, which is loosely connected to the University of Oregon and the EarthJustice Legal Defense Fund, a Seattle group that tackles Oregon issues.

But CRAG, according to its founders, is treading new ground with its Portland location.

“Nobody in this area is doing this kind of thing,” Bloemers said.

In 18 months of operation, CRAG has grown from the two lawyers working out of their apartments to a full-fledged – though admittedly tightly budgeted – operation located in a simple office space in Southwest Portland.

There’s one part-time staffer who handles fundraising, a part-time attorney who works from Alaska, an eight-member board of directors who make final decisions about which cases the organization will take on and a growing wave of pro-bono help from other lawyers and students from local law schools.

“We . . . envisioned a group of young, dedicated attorneys working together just to find out what they could accomplish if they really tried,” Winter wrote in one of CRAG’s first newsletters.

So far, the experiment seems to be working.

By the end of its first year in operation, the organization had racked up a record of helping groups shut down seven timber sales. It provided support for Southwest Portland residents trying to keep a fast food restaurant from locating in their community. And currently, Bloemers and Winter are working with a group of citizens to make sure public and environmental interests are considered by developers interested in building on scenic Mount Hood.

Since providing the initial push for CRAG, Bloemers and Winter have settled into roles as the organization’s only full-time staff attorneys. But they still feel a strong sense of responsibility for the overall success of the nonprofit organization.

Their days are a strange mix – equal parts giddiness, born of the freedom of following a path they’ve carved themselves, and unrelenting stress. The combination may be best understood by entrepreneurs starting a risky venture, which is exactly how Winter and Bloemers view their roles in creating CRAG.

Armed with almost no money to start the organization, the two lawyers were forced to approach foundations for grants and private contributors for donations, drumming up money in much the same way a start-up business scrounges for venture capital.

They also had to stir up more than a little business savvy.

“Law school provides very little practical training in how to run a business,” Bloemers said. “

Instead, the two attorneys picked up some business basics at Stoel Rives and added their own mix of instinct and common sense.

While still employed by the large-scale law firm, they took a pro-bono case together to see if their work approaches meshed. They also paid off their school loans before they left Stoel Rives, a step that has allowed them to live on the less-than-lucrative salaries as staff attorneys for CRAG.

They also have a solid three-year plan for the organization, a strategy that includes bumping up operating revenue from donations and grants – which currently sits at \$100,000 – by one-third.

While Bloemers and Winter know that goal is roughly the equivalent of the pay for a third or fourth year association at a top-level law firm, the two attorneys say they’re not interested in returning to the private sector. What they’ve found with CRAG can’t be bought, even with a six digit annual salary from a high prestige firm.

“We work hard,” Winter said, “but we sleep better at night.”

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[Back to Front Page](#)

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