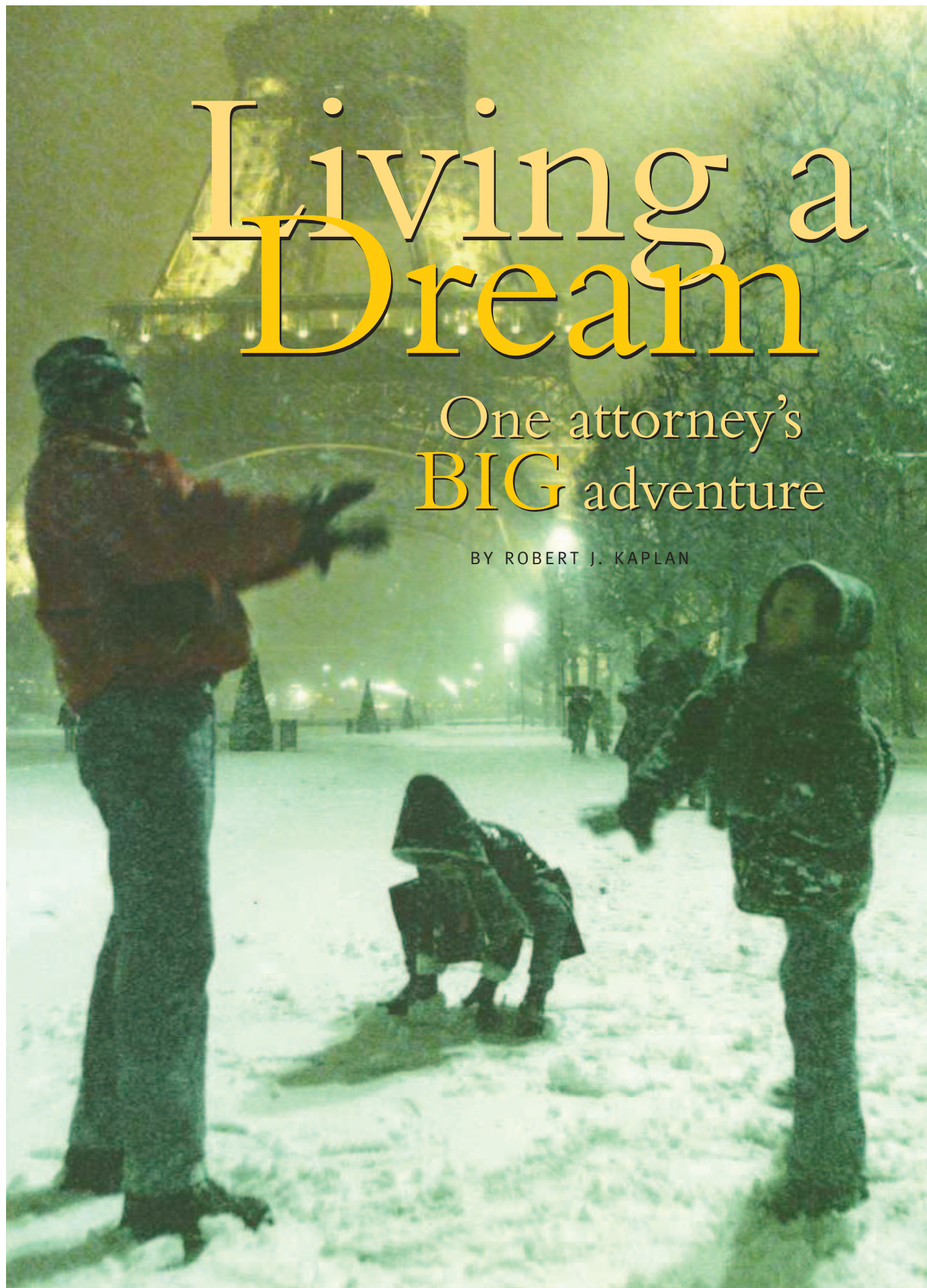


Living a Dream

One attorney's BIG adventure

BY ROBERT J. KAPLAN



Sometimes I wonder if my fate could really hinge on something as banal as frequent-flier miles. In late 1996, my wife, Kelly, and I discovered that we had a large number of miles that we would lose if not used by year's end. We booked a 10-day trip for September 1997, split between London and Paris. We went on with our hectic lives and pretty much forgot about it.

I had just turned 40 years old and had been practicing law for more than 15 years. I was regarded as one of the top insurance bad faith lawyers in San Diego and, by most accounts, was living a dream life. However, my passion for practicing law had dwindled considerably. Notwithstanding the long list of things I had to be thankful for, I felt that *something* was lacking. I also knew I wasn't the only person who felt that way.

Our trip to Europe was great; however, shortly after we returned to San Diego, as I was backing my car out of the garage, I could tell something was bothering Kelly. I put my foot on the brake and asked, "What's the matter?"

I will never forget her response: "Don't get me wrong. I'm not complaining. But—I think it would be wonderful for us and for the kids if we were to move to Paris." I could tell from the tone of her voice and the look in her eyes that she was serious. I turned off the engine.

"Obviously, we have a lot to talk about. Unfortunately, I have to be in court in 45 minutes. Let's get a babysitter so we can go out for dinner and talk about this."

Although I'd had a great time in Paris, it didn't strike the same chord in me as it had clearly struck in Kelly. However, losing my mother when I was 12 made me a true believer that life is short, and living in another culture was something I had always wanted to do. My analytical mind went into high gear. I thought that even though Paris wouldn't be my first choice, it is the most culturally rich city in the world and would be an ideal base for exploring Europe, something that was most appealing to me.

In the half hour that had passed from the moment Kelly hit me with her life-altering idea until I arrived at the

courthouse, I had made up my mind. Kelly and I were going to do what millions of people dream of doing, yet almost no one ever does.

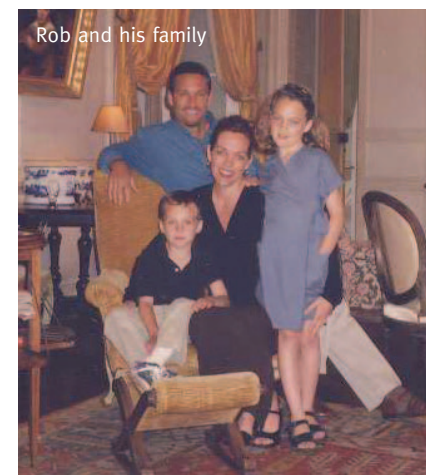
During the next two months I found myself repeatedly diving into the pool of truth. It's one thing to say, "Yes, I have the courage to leave my 'as good as it gets' life in idyllic San Diego and move to Paris with my wife and two young children, where we don't know a soul, none of us speak the language and I wouldn't know what to do if any of the infinite number of catastrophes that could potentially befall us were to occur." It's another to truly have the courage to take the plunge.

Kelly's job became planner for our Big Adventure. After a wild rollercoaster ride, we found and moved into a wonderful apartment in the perfect *cartier* (pocket) within an ideal *arrondissement* (neighborhood). Within a three-block radius, there were five bakeries, four butcher shops, four cheese shops, three flower shops, three wine shops, dozens of little boutiques and more than 50 restaurants.

Aside from the depressing cold and rainy weather, the unrelenting cigarette smokers and the rude Parisians, our Big Adventure was the stuff dreams are made of. The amount of time I was able to spend with our children, Samantha and Rex, and the relationships that Kelly and I forged with people from so many different countries and backgrounds made me feel richer than Bill Gates. I no longer suffer from chronic wanderlust about skiing in the Swiss Alps, leisurely meandering through Tus-

cany, spending weeks exploring Spain, experiencing the excitement of Amsterdam, drinking hot apple cider while listening to Mozart during Christmas in Strasburg or seeing the colorful rawness of Morocco.

Living overseas also allowed me to seriously explore a number of different business opportunities that I had always been too busy to even consider. When we decided that the time had come to return to the United States, we thought long and hard about starting afresh somewhere on the East Coast. But, in the end, as Dorothy said, "There's no place



Rob and his family

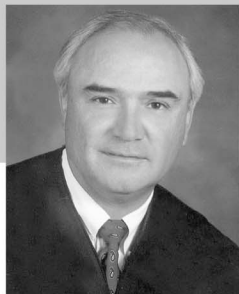
ROB KAPLAN

I WAS REGARDED AS ONE OF THE TOP INSURANCE BAD FAITH LAWYERS IN SAN DIEGO AND, BY MOST ACCOUNTS, WAS LIVING A DREAM LIFE. HOWEVER, MY PASSION FOR PRACTICING LAW HAD DWINDLED CONSIDERABLY.

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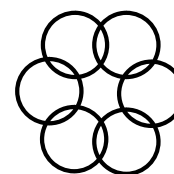
like home." When people ask why we came back, I say there are three main reasons: First, as shallow as it may sound, the weather in Paris was downright depressing. Second, Kelly and I had some fundamental problems with the French educational system. Finally, I really missed the fish tacos at Rubio's.

About three years ago, a good friend made me an offer to become of counsel to his firm. When I first dipped my foot into the litigation pool, it felt good. It was something that I knew well. But after my first bout with an unpleasant adversary, I realized that going back to the practice of law for me was like going back to an ex-girlfriend. At first, there was a comfortable familiarity, but later I remembered that there was a reason she was an "ex"!

About six months later, I was having breakfast with another close friend, who had become a full-time mediator while I was living in Paris. He said, "Rob, if you put half the energy you put into your law practice into a mediation practice, there is no doubt in my mind that you will become one of the most sought-after mediators in San Diego."

After a lot of soul searching, I decided to jump in with both feet and focus 100 percent of my energies on doing mediation. I've now been at it for two years, and the wondrous thing is that I am the happiest I've ever been, even happier than when I was living large in Paris. I guess the moral of the story is that you don't have to move to Paris—or Aspen or Mexico or some tropical island—to really live the dream. ■

When somebody asks Rob Kaplan what he does for a living, his response is, "I used to be a warrior; now I'm a peacemaker." That reply often leads to the story you've just read. If you would like a list of his favorite restaurants in Paris or would like to discuss a potential mediation with him, his contact information is available on his web site at www.kaplanmediation.com.



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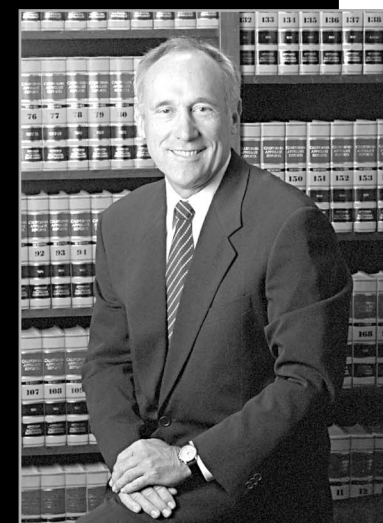
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