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## Chuck Zauzig's Zen



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serendipitous meeting

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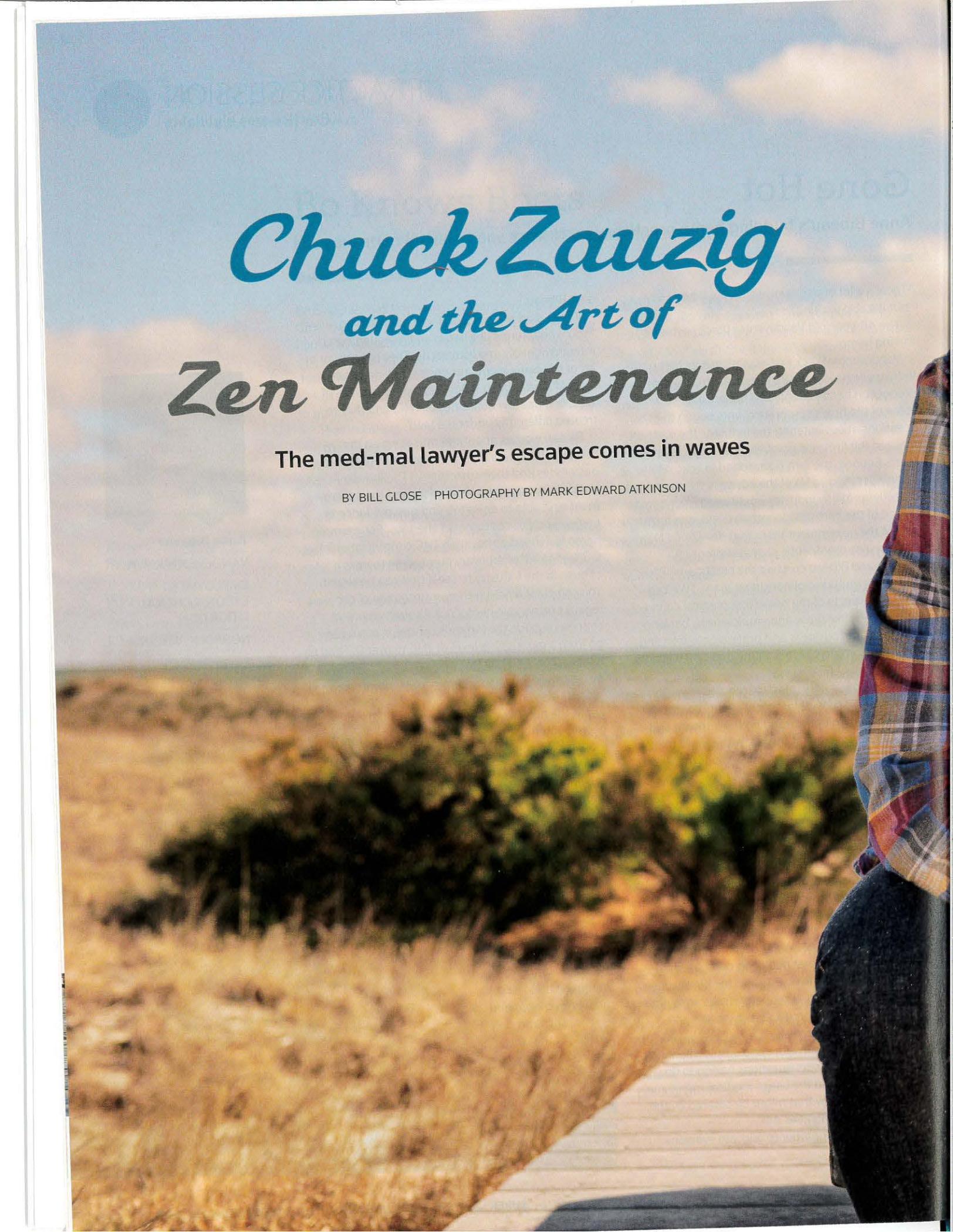
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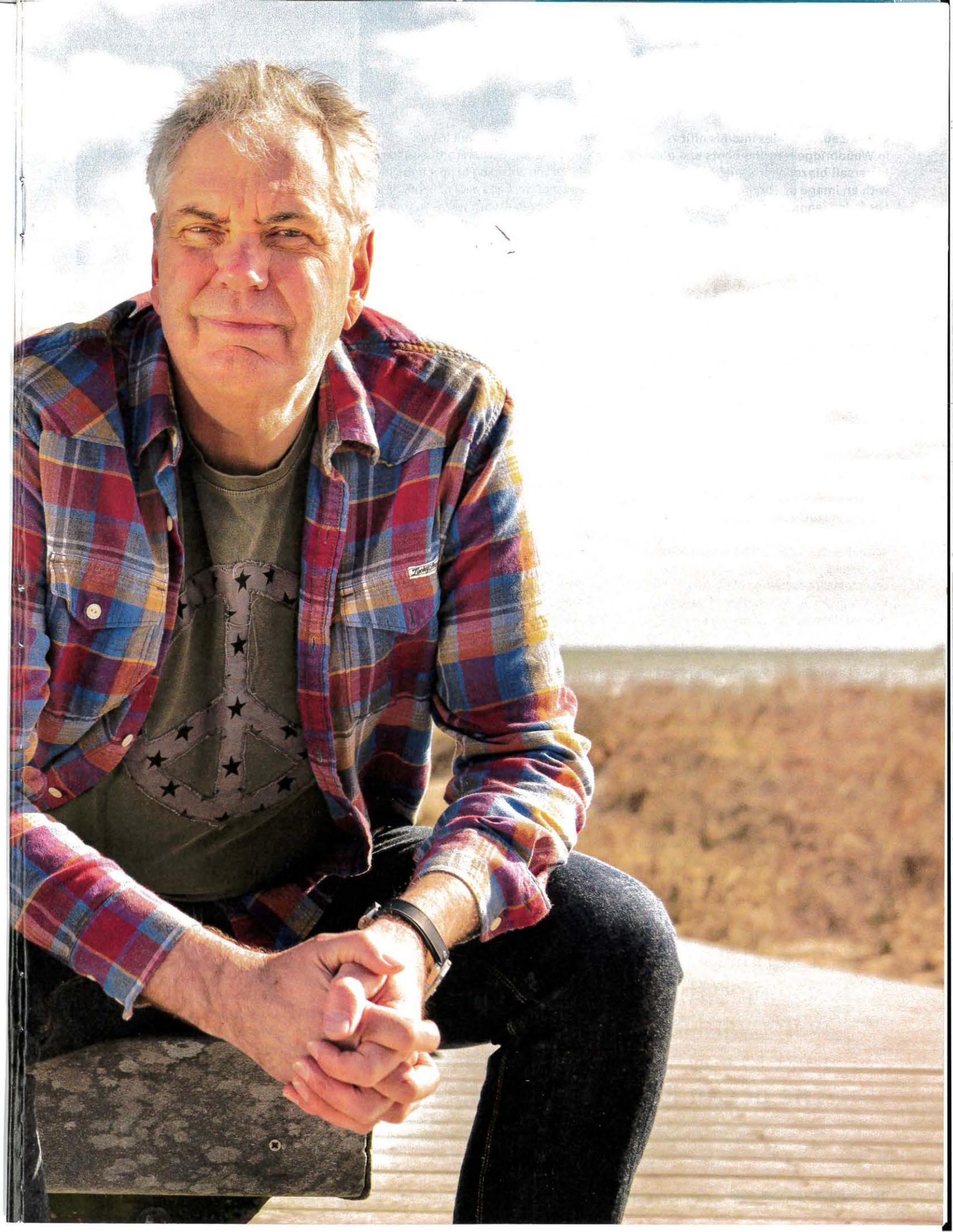
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*Chuck Zauzig*  
*and the Art of*  
*Zen Maintenance*

The med-mal lawyer's escape comes in waves

BY BILL GLOSE PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK EDWARD ATKINSON



**Chuck Zauzig strides into his office in Woodbridge wearing boots and a tattersall blazer over a surf-brand T-shirt with an image of Buddha on the front. His faded jeans are patched at the knee with a tiger-patterned flap of fabric cut from an old shirt. He hardly seems likely to be one of the top medical malpractice lawyers in the state—or, as Jeffrey Briet of Breit Cantor Grana Buckner, calls him one of the best “in the country.”**

“Chuck is easy-going,” Breit says. “He has no ego, no drama.”

And no qualms about showing up to the office as he is, even when his wife urged him to change his clothes this morning, knowing he was coming in for an interview.

Zauzig shrugs.

The office building in the Lake Ridge neighborhood exudes a similar casual charm. A Japanese maple out front, a recessed entrance leading into a glass-fronted atrium, and a brick interior with a faux gas-lamp chandelier and sconces. His second-floor office displays the expected necessities—whiteboard, shelves lined with legal tomes, a scattering of case files—but it's the nearly 10-foot surfboard leaning against the wall that draws the eye.

After Zauzig folds his 6'6" frame into an armchair, he swivels to run a hand over the Hawaiian plumeria flowers painted on its nose. “This is here to kind of remind me of not what I'd rather be doing, but *sometimes* what I'd rather be doing,” he says.

His medical malpractice work requires meticulous preparation and intense study of complicated procedures, symptoms and effects. Emblematic of these demands, Zauzig keeps a quote by legendary basketball coach Bobby Knight posted on the wall: “Most people have the will to win,

few have the will to prepare to win.”

“Getting ready for trial is arduous,” says Zauzig. “If you are going to do it right, it takes a lot of work and a lot of hours. The days are enjoyable when you're on your feet [arguing in the courtroom]. But then you go back and you work all night, every night, even though you're ready, because you're trying to figure out how to capture what happened that day in your closing argument. It can get physically exhausting.”

That's when Zauzig heads three hours south from his Fairfax home to his beach house to lose himself in the waves. “I'll get up in the mornings, take one of my surfboards and go paddle out,” he says. “Even if there are no waves, watching the sun coming in the water with dolphins coming up next to you, it's pretty spectacular. The ocean is very spiritual.”

For the past dozen years, Zauzig has taken annual surfing trips with a handful of other lawyers to places like Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Hawaii. Framed photos from these expeditions are in the hallway right across from the Bobby Knight quote. Zauzig's yin and yang.

“I think Chuck looks forward to our surf trips more than anyone because it's the only time for him to relax,” says Breit, a founding member of the surfing crew. “These trips are generally in places where internet connections are not great. You're in the water for four or five hours a day, and you can just unplug and relax. Your brain needs it in order to rejuvenate and re-energize.”

While Zauzig embraces the Zen nature of surfing, law's combative nature thrills him; as does combat, period. Photos of famous boxers hang on his office wall. Sugar Ray Robinson being knocked out of the ring by Jake LaMotta; Hurricane Carter looking out

from a prison cell. As he tries to articulate what it feels like to win a case, he nods toward a 5-foot framed photograph of Muhammad Ali standing over a defeated Sonny Liston. Like that.

“Taking on doctors,” he says. “Sitting across and questioning them and not letting them BS you because you know the medicine ...”

He gives a boyish grin. “That's a lot of fun.”

**ZAUZIG'S FATHER WAS A BOMBARDIER/ NAVIGATOR** who flew dozens of combat missions during WWII and the Korean War. The military life moved the family often, so Zauzig grew up in multiple states and countries, including two stints in Germany. In 1968, when he was in high school, his family moved to Virginia Beach and his father retired from the Air Force, making Virginia their permanent home.

“We were comfortable,” Zauzig says, “but we didn't have a lot of extra money. If you wanted anything, you had to go out and work for it.”

In the winter, he and his high school basketball teammates would clean swimming pools for extra money, and in the summer, Zauzig worked at a hotel fronting the beach as desk clerk, bellhop and launderer.

“I was working right on the ocean,” he says, “and I could see the waves. If they were good waves, I could go on out right after I got off.”

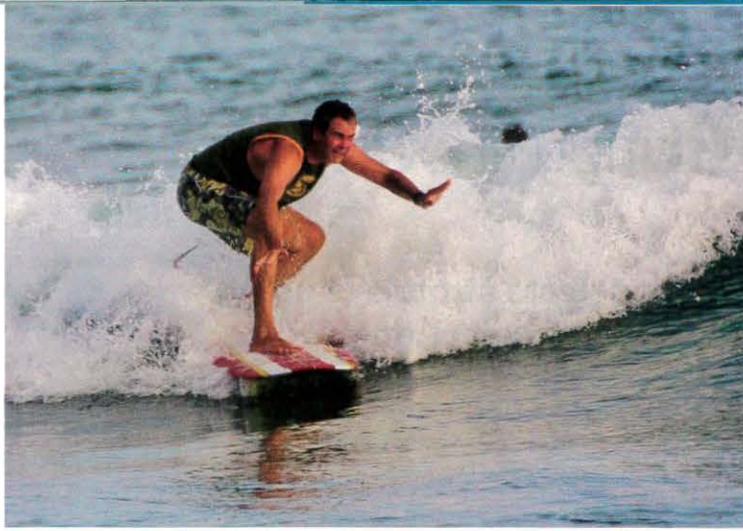
In 1971, Zauzig went to Madison College (now JMU) uncertain of what he wanted to do, content to bob along like driftwood and land wherever the tide was taking him. He earned a degree in political science with minors in English and philosophy. “I enjoyed the whole liberal arts thing, exchanging ideas and all that,” he says. “I was kind of a hippie.”

At the same time, he wanted to do something to extend his education. So he moved on to law school at T.C. Williams, even though he wasn't yet sold on becoming a lawyer. “In the middle of law school,” he says, “I thought, maybe I'll just go out West to be a ski instructor.”

The ski instructor fantasy ended as soon as Zauzig realized law was, essentially, a competition. “Then I was all in,” he says. In 1978, he hung a shingle in Richmond as a general practitioner, working out of a tiny office right across from the federal courthouse. While he'd take any case, he wanted to do criminal law. Clients were



“Even if there are no waves, watching the sun coming in the water with dolphins coming up next to you, it's pretty spectacular. **The ocean is very spiritual.**”



PHOTOS BY BOB MORECOCK

Zauzig doing his thing at one of his frequent surfing haunts, Playa Colorado in Tola, Nicaragua.

hard to come by at first, so for a year he worked nights as a waiter. But then the cases started coming.

"Chuck is very outgoing and he relates well to people," says William Artz, a medical malpractice lawyer in Northern Virginia. "When you talk to him, he is really focused on you and interested in your plight. His personality blends well with his level of competence as a lawyer. That's what gives some lawyers tremendous jury appeal. This is not something that you can be taught. It is inherent."

"He just has a real sense of getting to the nuggets in a case," adds Breit, "cutting out the fluff, focusing the court and the jury on the issues that are important, and explaining them in a way that is simple."

Zauzig heard that Prince William County was rich with opportunity, so he moved his practice to Woodbridge. "I did misdemeanors, felonies, murder cases, capital murder cases," he says. "I did divorce, criminal, a car accident case here and there. I even did some bankruptcy. I did everything."

In 1989, he formed a partnership with two other lawyers, which has evolved through several iterations into Nichols Zauzig. After winnowing down his case load to focus on criminal and negligence, he began to pile up seven-figure settlements and verdicts. In one case against Chrysler, which settled for \$2 million, Zauzig represented a widow whose husband died in a car accident caused by the defective driver-side seat collapsing.

"That problem could have been easily fixed by strengthening the other side [of

the seat]," he says. "It was just a matter of putting a \$5 metal hockey stick kind of structure on the other side, and that would've made a difference. A lot of big corporations, sometimes they make calculated risks that it's better to pay off X amount of lawsuits than make a change. To me that's outrageous conduct. But at some point, your job is over. It's not like I have a vehicle to force them to change."

Opponents aren't always so obstinate. After a trial in which Zauzig won on behalf of a client whose relative suffered bedsores after not being properly attended to at a hospital, the hospital requested use of his court displays so that they could train their staff and prevent the problem from happening again.

"I often tell my clients that their cases are bigger than themselves," Zauzig says. "At a minimum, [the defendants] will think twice about doing the same thing again. And sometimes, you can make a systemic change."

Over the years, Zauzig has traveled the country lecturing other lawyers on trial strategy, tactics and other areas of personal injury and med-mal. He has also served on the American Association for Justice (AAJ) Board of Governors; has been a past president of the Virginia Trial Lawyers Association (VTLA); and is the current chairman of VTLA's political action committee.

"Chuck has got such great relationships with people in the General Assembly," says VTLA president Elliott Buckner. "That includes legislators and lobbyists. It's fun to watch Chuck walk into a room; you can

feel the dynamics kind of change. When Chuck comes in, people perk up a little bit. He catches their attention. I don't know if that's because he's taller than everyone or if it's his presence and his experience. But when Chuck comes in and starts to talk, people listen."

**WHILE ZAUZIG ENJOYED HIS CRIMINAL DEFENSE NICHE**, since 1990 he's focused on medical malpractice.

"What you are doing for people in these cases is meaningful," he says. "The people who come to me are devastated. These are not small-injury cases. They are catastrophic. They are deaths. They are life-changing injuries."

He admits med-mal has another important allure. "It's great competition. There are great lawyers on the other side and the trials are meaningful. I enjoy the chess game, so to speak, with really good chess masters on the other side."

Juries love him. So do his clients, and afterwards they'll send along Christmas cards and notes updating Zauzig on how they're slowly patching up their lives.

"When I see a family that is able to do things for their disabled child, get their house modified to make it more user-friendly for the child, I mean, that's what it's all about, right?" **SL**