



# AMAZING GRACE

By Sam Bishop

**G**race Berg Schaible's father was a carpenter — a master carpenter who apprenticed in his home country of Norway starting in the late 1800s at age 11. Which is to say he knew how to work wood as well as any man. Had he not, UAF might be a lesser place today.

Schaible's father, Hans Berg, didn't put up any campus buildings in Fairbanks. Rather, he helped shape his daughter's intellect by building a set of bookshelves in Juneau when she was a young child.

Schaible's association with UAF dates to her arrival as an undergraduate in 1944. Now 89, she lives in a spacious riverside condominium tucked off a quiet street corner in Fairbanks. A lawyer who served as an Alaska Permanent Fund board member, state attorney general and UA regent, Schaible remains among the university's most ardent supporters and generous benefactors.

Her career, pursued at a time when few women followed such paths, demonstrates an unusual level of determination, intelligence and charm, according to friends.

"We've always called her Amazing Grace," said Barbara Schuhmann, who worked as an attorney in Schaible's Fairbanks law office for decades. "She has always been very thoughtful, organized and competent. She just knows her stuff."

However, those attributes might never have propelled Schaible on the path she chose if it weren't for her father's bookshelves, which had a curious connection to UAF themselves.

The shelves didn't hold books for the young girl. Rather, her father built them for James Wickersham, the Gold Rush-era judge who became the Territory of Alaska's delegate to Congress.

In 1915, Wickersham secured congressional approval of the federal land grant that gave UAF a place to exist and catalyzed the institution's creation in 1917. After losing his delegate's seat and moving to Juneau in the 1930s, Wickersham asked Hans Berg to build him a library.

"But the library wasn't big enough for all the books," Schaible told an interviewer in 2006, "so Wickersham said, 'Mr. Berg, you have children. Would you like to have some books?' ... So my father came home with *The Book of Knowledge*. He came home with the 'History of the Peoples of the World.'"

The books helped spark Schaible's imagination and ambition, which in turn gave her an abiding focus on higher education — starting with her own at UAF.

After more than 70 years of association, she still finds that "there are things going on there all the time that interest me," she said in a mid-April interview.

## Early confidence

Schaible, in a lengthy series of interviews in 2006 as part of the American Bar Association's "Women Trailblazers in the Law" project, described an idyllic childhood in Juneau.

Her father and mother, a Swedish immigrant, married in Juneau in 1915 and had three children, Schaible being the youngest. They lived in the center of the city's residential area, but she recalls her father hunting and fishing for their meat. Her mother, Mandis, put up much of the family's food.

Her childhood differed from most in one respect, though. A close friend, she said, was the daughter of the principal of the Bureau of Indian Affairs-run school and had to attend its functions.

"She didn't like being the only Caucasian in the room and so she'd drag me along, and as a result I got to know these kids, long before they were ever permitted to go to our schools," Schaible told the ABA interviewer.

World War II delayed Schaible's college career after she graduated from high school in 1943. She stayed in Juneau, where her abilities had already caught the attention of some prominent Alaskans. At 17, she worked for Frank Heintzleman, the head of the U.S. Forest Service who would later become territorial governor. She then got jobs with the BIA and the superintendent of Juneau schools.

Schaible attributes her early success to being an officer in the Mason's Rainbow Girls. "I had to learn procedures, like that of parliament," she said in April. "That gave me confidence in my ability to persuade people by talking to them."

While working at the school superintendent's office, she met Charles Bunnell, the first president of the university. Bunnell was on a recruiting swing through Juneau in 1944 and had a message from her high school classmates in Fairbanks: She should come north.

Her father resisted, at first, Schaible said in 2006. "I don't want you graduating from Moose College," he said, but agreed that she could at least start there.

## Small-state connections

In fall 1944, she came to Fairbanks. She stayed two years before trying George Washington University in Washington, D.C., where she hoped to advance a dream hatched while reading Wickersham's books.

"I wanted to find out about how one gets into the diplomatic service," she said. "That was easy — I couldn't. I didn't have a rich father." So she came back to finish a degree in history at UAF in 1949.

She ended up working as secretary for both President Bunnell and his successor, Terris Moore.



This early acquaintance with the university's leadership set a pattern. "I've known all the presidents of the university except one," Schaible said.

Schaible returned to graduate school at George Washington University in the early 1950s. There, the campaign for Alaska statehood was ramping up. Schaible became a regular guest at the home of Alaska's Democratic territorial delegate, Bob Bartlett, and his wife, Vide. That small-state connection had been established earlier when the Bartletts lived in Juneau and were fixing up a house. Vide Bartlett consulted with carpenter Hans Berg on the job, so Schaible got to know her.

Returning to Juneau from Washington, D.C., in the summers, Schaible worked on her thesis — a study of federal legislative influence upon Alaska — in the territorial library. There, she roamed the stacks with the recently deposed Ernest Gruening, a Democrat who had served as Alaska's federally appointed governor from 1939-1953. He was writing a book on the territory's history.

"The territorial librarian didn't like him," Schaible said in 2006. "And so he would go to her for help finding something that he wanted, and she'd say 'It's on the shelf.'" So Schaible would find the material.

Alaskans tended to vote for Democrats at that time, and Schaible allied herself with that end of the political spectrum early in life, breaking with her father's inclinations.

"I was a Democrat from the time that my father said, 'I don't want to be bothered listening to you,'" she said.

## Helping create Alaska's laws

With her experience, connections and master's degree, Schaible was invited to join the newly formed Alaska Legislative Council as a researcher before the 1955 session of the Alaska Territorial Legislature.

"All of a sudden we were in a legislative session and they were having me draft bills — like I knew what in blue blazes I was doing," she said in the ABA interview.

Tom Stewart, a Juneau attorney and later judge, talked her into trying Yale Law School, his alma mater, because it had a tradition of graduating women.

She hated Yale initially.

"Classes started and I felt as lost as any human being can be," she recalled in 2006. "I thought, 'Oh, what am I doing here? I don't belong here.'"

Schaible quit the school briefly, but Yale officials convinced her to return.

While in Connecticut in late November 1957, she picked up a copy of *The New York Times*, and the word "Alaska" in a headline caught her eye. The story said Druska Schaible, head of the UA biology department and wife of Dr. Arthur Schaible, had died in a fire at the Lathrop Building in downtown Fairbanks.

Schaible knew both of them. She had dated the doctor when she was an undergraduate in Fairbanks. She wrote to express her sympathy, and that note rekindled the relationship. They

married in New York City on Christmas Day 1958. She graduated from Yale several weeks later, just as Alaska became a state.

Life changed dramatically for the young woman. The couple had the means and the interest to put her childhood dreams of traveling the world within reach. They went to South Africa, the doctor's home country, on their honeymoon.

## An unusual career

Schaible wasn't the sort to rely solely on her husband's success, though. Returning to Fairbanks, she joined the law firm of McNealy, Merdes and Camarot. Partners Ed Merdes and Henry Camarot had been at the legislative council in Juneau when she worked there.

The bar accepted her in 1960, and she became the first attorney sworn in under the laws of the new state.

Linda Harding, Schaible's closest friend and a frequent traveling companion today, met Schaible at the law firm in the late 1960s. Schaible coaxed Harding out of a job at the court system. Harding said she loved to listen to Schaible's travel stories.

"She would come in, sit on the desk, light a cigarette and talk," Harding said. "I had work to do, but, as long as she was talking, I was certainly listening."

The firm has evolved into Cook, Schuhmann & Groseclose. Barbara Schuhmann arrived there in 1976 as a new lawyer. Her husband, fellow attorney Bob Groseclose, had grown up in Fairbanks.

"We wanted to come back to Alaska at that point, so I got this offer from this law firm in Fairbanks," Schuhmann said. "Even better, it had a woman who was a partner. It was very unusual in those days."

After arriving, Schuhmann found herself even more impressed with her new boss. "She's very low-key — soft-spoken, I would say," she said. "She just exudes competence."

By the mid 1970s, Schaible's primary duties were with the Arctic Slope Regional Corp., one of 13 created to accept land title and money provided by Congress through the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

Schaible said the ASRC work was the highlight of her private practice years. Not only were the issues interesting, but so were the people and communities.

"She spent quite a bit of time in Barrow because that's where their headquarters were and she just absolutely loved it," Schuhmann said.

Schaible also traveled to smaller villages. "She'd have to go by snowmachine [from the airports] into the meetings."

Harding said villagers appreciated Schaible's down-to-earth style.

"She would take food up there and cook for them," Harding said. "She made many fast friends."

Schuhmann said Schaible did the same across the state because she radiates a genuine interest in other people. "Some

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people are kind of show-offs. They're trying to impress. They worry about what they wear or what they're driving," she said. "Grace has never been in that category."

Harding said Schaible's disinterest in flashy vehicles also fit well with her passion for raising enormous white Great Pyrenees dogs. "It needed to be a utilitarian car," Harding said dryly.

## Serving Alaska

By 1986, Schaible expected to retire from the law firm shortly. Her husband had died six years earlier, and she still wanted to do the traveling they had planned. She also had many other interests, such as the Sitka Summer Music Festival. Democratic Gov. Bill Sheffield made her a university regent in 1985.

Newly elected Gov. Steve Cowper, a fellow Fairbanks lawyer, called Schaible and said he wanted to appoint her as Alaska's attorney general. Schaible had supported Cowper's candidacy privately but said nothing publicly out of appreciation for Sheffield's choice of her as a regent.

"So it came as quite a surprise to me that he wanted me as his AG," Schaible said in 2006. "He said, 'I am having a cabinet of really quite young people and I just, sort of, need an old — a mature — person.'"

Schaible accepted but stuck to her promise of staying only two years. She then continued to work part-time "of counsel" at her law firm. She also wasn't quite done with public service. In 1995, Democratic Gov. Tony Knowles appointed her to the Alaska Permanent Fund Corp.'s Board of Trustees, where she spent two years.

She'd first served as a fund trustee when she was Cowper's attorney general. She also knew former Gov. Jay Hammond, a Republican whom many consider the fund's founder because of his advocacy for the 1976 constitutional amendment that created it. They graduated from UA together in the class of 1949.

During the fund's first few decades, managers placed most of the money in conservative investments such as bonds. Schaible and others successfully argued for the stock market. The majority of the \$53 billion fund is now invested in stocks.

"And that's really what made the fund, not the bonds," Schaible said in April.

## Traveling and giving

Schaible retired from work and most volunteer boards by about 2000. She turned her attention primarily to travel and philanthropy.

Her favorite trips in recent decades have been to Svalbard, the islands north of Norway, where she watches polar bears from small cruise ships.

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"I just loved traveling in the high Arctic and I still do," she said in April. "I'm headed out on June 1 to spend three weeks in Svalbard watching polar bears."

The ships take visitors to one of the Earth's most remote, inhospitable lands, but passengers are

not roughing it, said Harding, who has been to Svalbard with Schaible three times.

"I think of it as having a condo in Miami. Everything is taken care of, and it moves, so you don't see the same thing," Harding said.

At Schaible's condo in Fairbanks, the decorations follow the same theme: polar bears. Every wall, shelf and table holds an image, sculpture or other item inspired by the species.

The living room's central wall features an enormous polar bear painting by Todd Sherman, now UAF's dean of the College of Liberal Arts. Her collection includes every polar bear photograph by Tom Mangelsen and every polar bear image by artist Robert Bateman. In 2006, she estimated she had as many as 1,000 items.

She has willed the collection to the UA Museum of the North, which she also supports with monetary gifts.

"She's given so much, both in donations and artwork," said Aldona Jonaitis, the museum's director.

Jonaitis met Schaible 22 years ago when she arrived to take the job. They teamed up on a fundraising campaign to expand the museum, along with Joe Usibelli Sr., then chairman of Usibelli Coal Mine Inc. The museum project was completed in 2005.

"I don't think the museum would be where it is without Grace," Jonaitis said.

Schaible, who chaired the UA Foundation Board of Trustees from 1997-2003, said she believes in philanthropy.

"I like the idea that I can trust people to carry forward what I want to accomplish," she said.

Harding sees Schaible's generosity toward the university as the natural extension of her experience with the institution.

"She came here not as a wealthy person," Harding said. "She was very capable, and people discovered that about her and gave her the full opportunity to bloom, and she felt the responsibility to pass that on." ❧

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Sam Bishop is a writer and editor at UAF Marketing and Communications. Born and raised in Alaska, he worked as a newspaper journalist for 27 years. He first met Grace Schaible in 1987 when she became attorney general. She left the post three weeks before the Exxon Valdez oil spill, news of which Bishop first told then-Gov. Steve Cowper on the morning of March 24, 1989.

Web extra: Read extensive interviews with Grace Schaible at the American Bar Association's "Women Trailblazers in the Law" project website, <http://bit.ly/schaibleinterview>. Quotes from the interviews, conducted in 2006, were used in this story.