

Marty Lambert

Gallatin County Attorney a man of conviction who speaks his mind

Gallatin County Attorney Marty Lambert leaned back in his office chair, his hands clamped behind his salt-and-pepper hair.

"When you're facing these kind of challenges and you're passive, or apologizing for doing your job, you're probably not a very good county attorney," he said. Lambert, who has been the county attorney for seven years, is facing several big battles in the months ahead, including prosecuting two murder suspects and proposed changes to the county's overburdened judicial branch.

Yet he's comfortable being interviewed. He has a confident demeanor. He's always had a knack for finding his way into the news.

Most prosecutors don't fit the description of attorneys seen on television law dramas. But Lambert, in a way, does. He's aggressive in the courtroom. He has little sympathy for witnesses he feels are dishonest. He rubs some defense attorneys the wrong way. He speaks his mind.

Some of his peers describe him as a bulldog. But Lambert scoffs at the notion that he's a controversial public figure.

"I think people here expect the county attorney to be a bulldog," Lambert, 49, said. "I believe in the cause of law enforcement and crime victims."

He fights for his beliefs, most notably a new jail, and is not one to hold his tongue if he disagrees with someone.

Last year, he disagreed openly with a jail consultant the county hired who said bails here are too high. He frequently butted heads with former County Commissioner Jennifer Smith Mitchell on a variety of issues. He took exception to the way the Chronicle covered some of his cases, and he said as much.

"He has a talent for finding himself at the center of conflict," Deputy County Attorney Ashley Harrington said. "Which is probably a result of the fact that he is, at heart, an advocate."

She was quick to add, "He has an unimpeachable work ethic."

Lambert is a self-described social conservative and fiscal moderate. He knows that he prosecutes with a no-holds-barred conviction. And he says he doesn't allow his feelings to interfere with his job performance.

"If you allow the emotion of the situation to affect your judgment, you probably shouldn't be a county attorney," Lambert said.

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Lambert also describes himself as competitive, a trait he believes he inherited from his father.

Dobbie Lambert, a former Marine, was head basketball coach at Montana State University from 1955 to 1962. In that time, he never lost a home game to the University of Montana. He instilled discipline in his son at a young age.

Marty Lambert, who acknowledged he was never a fast runner, worked hard to make the MSU junior varsity football team in 1973. The undersized linebacker spent hours in the weight room, but his college football career lasted just one season.

"During a drill in 1974, I dislocated my kneecap," Lambert said. "That was the end of my football glory days."

Marty's mother, Arline, calls him "my miracle boy." She faced complications during her pregnancy with Marty, the youngest of two sons. Doctors told her she was going to lose her baby.

"I prayed and said, 'Please God, take care of him,'" she said.

He lived. He was a fighter before he was ever born. "And he was always a great little helper," Arline Lambert said.

Marty Lambert said his mother — who graduated with honors from the University of Southern California when she was just 19 — taught him "intellectual courage."

The values his parents taught him stayed with Lambert as he grew older.

He earned his law degree at UM. He's been a prosecutor here for more than 20 years, and the Gallatin County attorney since 1997. He'll be up for election again in 2006.

Few people argue with the fact that Lambert is a dogged public servant. He's bright, articulate and often works weekends.

But he prosecutes alleged criminals in his hometown with a passion that some defense attorneys say results in him losing his objectivity.

Bozeman attorney Bill Bartlett, for example, said he respects Lambert's advocacy for victims. But he also said Lambert can take a case personally, be so offended by an alleged crime that he can lose the objectivity that goes hand and hand with a powerful position.

It's not unusual to hear other defense attorneys say the same. "I've always respected Marty's abilities as a trial attorney," local criminal defense lawyer Jennifer Bordy said. "Obviously I disagree with his approach and judgment on cases sometimes."

She said several area attorneys were upset when Lambert subpoenaed convicted murderer Lee Robert Cowan's defense lawyer.

Lambert asked the court to demand attorney Chuck Watson to produce all documents regarding prior conversations with Cowan if Watson was going to use mental illness as a defense.

It was part of Lambert's unwavering position that if the murder case was going to trial, he wanted to call Watson to the stand.

Cowan pleaded guilty to killing his mother earlier this month and Lambert dropped his motion to disqualify Watson as counsel. Nonetheless, some say the subpoena crossed the line.

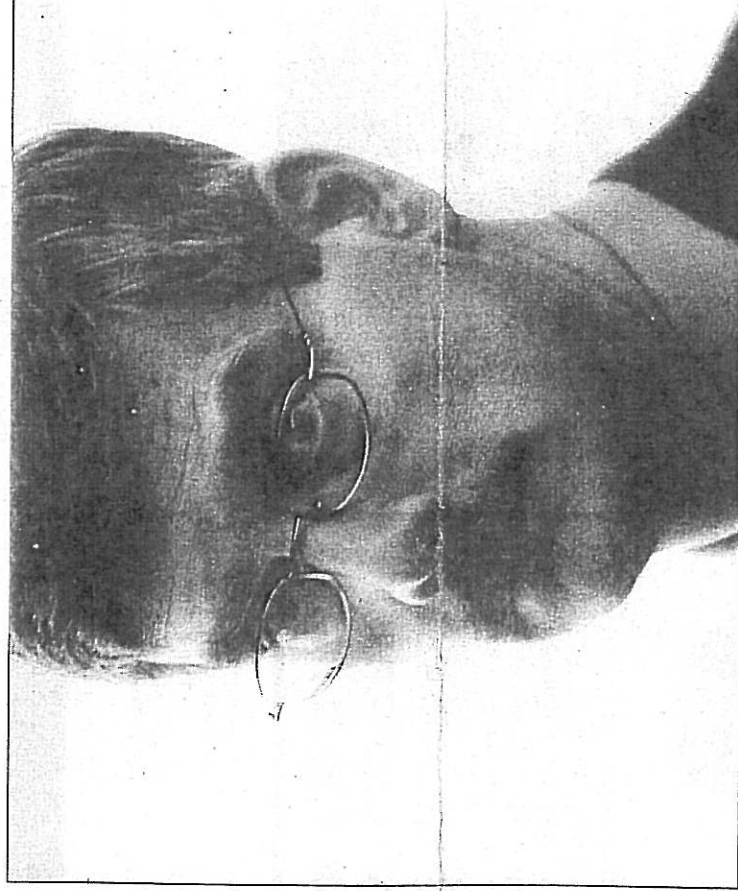
"It raised serious question about whether Marty understood attorney-client privileges," Bordy said.

But Lambert never saw it that way. In his eyes, he was prosecuting a murder suspect to the best of his ability.

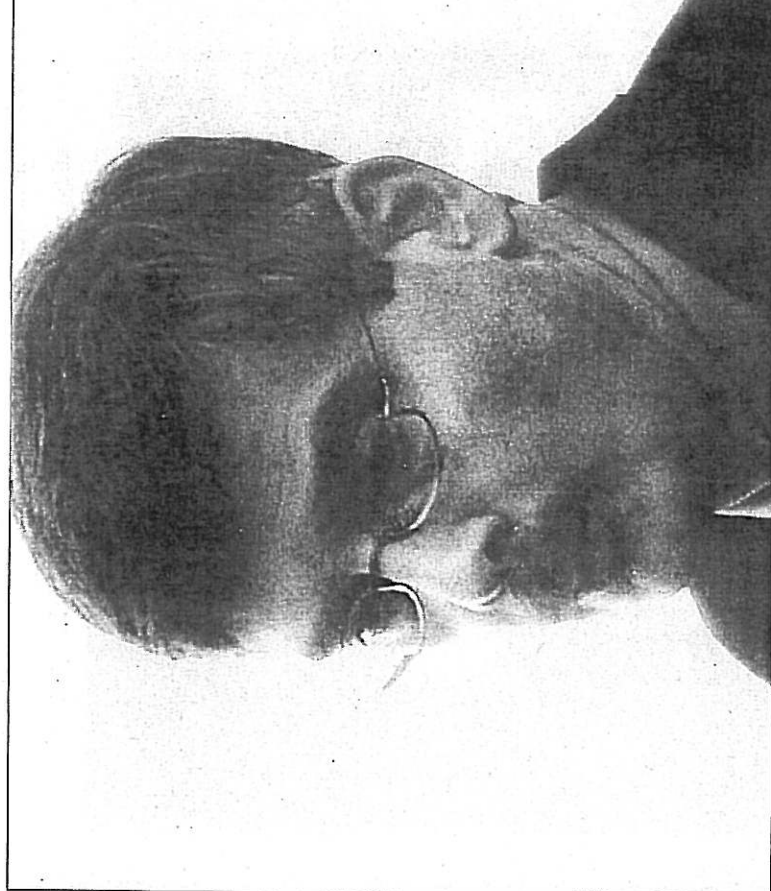
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"You can't do this job and not have some folks disagreeing with you and not liking you," Lambert said.

To him, he prosecutes alleged criminals the only way he knows how. And, despite being an imposing figure in the courtroom, Lambert said that's not the man he really is.

"You have to change modes when you come to work," Lambert said. "You see these folks' lives turned upside down. You get a little bit fired up to go do a job for them."

But at home, Lambert's different. He plays violin in the local symphony. He volunteers at the Boys and Girls Club, and Hearts and Homes. He's an avid reader of nonfiction, and is particularly fond of William F. Buckley's work.

"I don't golf, fish or ski," Lambert said, laughing. "I'm kind of a strange Montanan."

But he's visible around town. He frequently attends Bozeman High School athletic events. Two of his three children still attend the school, just as he did in the 1970s; the third is at college. And Lambert can't remember the last time he missed an MSU football game. He's a lifelong Bozeman resident and proud of that fact.

And even those who oppose him in court say the outspoken prosecutor has had moments of grace at his job.

Local defense attorney Al Avignone said following a hard-fought rape trial in 2003, where the jury sided with Avignone, Lambert went out of his way to shake his hand.

"He congratulated me after a big trial," Avignone said. "And that takes a lot."

He called Lambert a "formidable adversary" and added "there's no doubt we've rubbed each other the wrong way. Yet we're able to separate that from the fact that we respect each other."

Gallatin County Commissioner John Vincent agreed.

"He and I will differ at times," Vincent said. "Sometimes that creates a little tension, but that's normal."

Vincent and Lambert both expect to work through those differences as the county pushes for a new jail in the coming months.

Lambert's comfortable with the fact that not everyone's going to agree with his decisions.

A few months ago he took some heat for not allowing a young child's organs be donated. That decision went against the family's wishes. The boy was allegedly killed by his father, and Lambert said he didn't want to jeopardize the investigation.

"I can only do my job," Lambert said. "And as awful as it is for a family losing a 2-year-old, again, the public still expects me to do a job."

Lambert has a big year ahead of him. In addition to the homicide cases and the need to resolve the jam-packed jail, his office in 2005 is likely to break its own 2004 record for the number of cases handled. Plus, he's the president of the Montana County Attorneys Association this year.

But Lambert said he's more than a prosecutor. As he sits in his modest office at Judge Guenther Memorial Center, with few pictures on the walls and law books serving as the most noticeable decoration, he is quick to tick off his other passions — he's a Bobcat fan, a volunteer and has made a renewed effort to spend more time with his wife and kids and not work such long hours.

Prosecuting is just his day job — a job, he says, that will never be popular with everybody.

"But if you come to work and don't have a zeal for helping people, you should probably do something else," Lambert said.

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