

Negotiating a Better World

by Betsy Rogers

A Visionary Career as Lawyer and Philanthropist



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In the future when defenseless populations can live free from fear because corrupt regimes and rogue militias can no longer act with impunity, this new freedom will testify not only to the visionary commitment of legal scholars and diplomats, but also to the generosity of Steven Cash Nickerson, JD '85, MBA '93.



AS A CORPORATE LAWYER, alumnus Steven Cash Nickerson has built a career as an irreplaceable entrepreneur, working in mergers and acquisitions, creating and growing his own companies, and helping clients succeed in new enterprises.

This same zest for creating new ventures has shaped his work as a philanthropist, building an organization to raise funds for prostate cancer research at Washington University's Siteman Cancer Center and, on an even more far-reaching level, financing a worldwide initiative to write and implement a treaty banning crimes against humanity.

True to his entrepreneurial spirit, Nickerson's career path has taken many unexpected turns. When he completed law school in 1985, he took a position as in-house lawyer with Union Pacific Railroad. In 1989 he joined the Chicago law firm of Jenner & Block LLP, making partner just three years later. He then became president and general counsel of a large human resources consulting firm; founded his own HR enterprise, Workforce Strategies, in San Francisco; and since 2003, has been principal and chief financial officer of PDS Tech Inc., one of the largest U.S. aerospace and information technology staffing firms. With annual revenues of \$360 million, a 750,000-engineer database, and a top-secret security clearance, PDS Tech provides project support to companies fulfilling defense and aerospace contracts.

He especially enjoys human resources work. "There's such a human element to it," he says. "It's very personal, very emotional. You're very involved in people's lives." He finds profound satisfaction in helping people solve problems. "When people come to you, something hurts, and they're kind of stuck. I really enjoy helping people get unstuck, helping them find some solution they haven't thought of."

An early supporter of global legal studies at the law school, Nickerson was the one to whom Leila Nadya Sadat, the Henry H. Oberschelp Professor of Law and director of the Whitney R. Harris World Law Institute, turned for funding assistance. Sadat was in the early stages of a bold initiative addressing crimes against humanity. Nickerson was immediately interested.

"I understood the gap in the law," he says. "An agreed-upon standard of what you can and can't do to your own people doesn't exist. There are laws against genocide, but some atrocities aren't defined as genocide.

"I was really struck by the opportunity to do something that the world needs," Nickerson continues. "Washington University has such tremendous faculty. I thought helping Washington University become more engaged in these efforts would be great for the school and great for the world. But it takes funds to run these kinds of activities." That, he realized, is where he could help. Humanity United and the United States Institute of Peace are also supporting the initiative.

Sadat initially convened a steering committee in spring 2008 with South African Judge Richard Goldstone; war crimes expert M. Cherif Bassiouni; former U.N. Under-Secretary for Legal Affairs Hans Corell; Argentine human rights lawyer Juan Mendez; ICC judge, the Hon. Christine Van den Wyngaert; and Canadian lawyer William Schabas, director of the Irish Centre for Human Rights. In April 2009, the Steering Committee along with a distinguished group of international law experts from around the world met at the law school to begin drafting a Specialized Convention on Crimes Against Humanity. The group convened again at The Hague in June 2009, and in March 2010, at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C.

The committee has written, circulated, and debated the treaty. It now goes to United Nations member countries for debate and approval. Nickerson devoutly hopes for its success.

"I think we have the right people behind it," he says,

"and there's a window that's somewhat open right now." International support is building for the International Criminal Court, members of the U.S. Congress are discussing criminal sanctions for crimes against humanity, and international tribunals are producing a growing body of jurisprudence.

"Critical to getting it adopted," he contends, "is showing how what we currently have isn't working. After the Holocaust, we said, 'Never again.' But 100 million people have died since we said 'never again.' We have to establish dissatisfaction with the status quo."

The opportunity to work with the committee's scholars and jurists has thrilled Nickerson. "The level of intellect, experience, and passion is unbelievable," he says. And the law school's central role is also thrilling for him. "The Harris Institute has an incredible level of recognition and respect in the international community," he notes. "This is a powerful thing to be coming out of St. Louis, Missouri."

Perhaps the most poignant moment for Nickerson took place at this year's Brookings Institution meeting, where he was given a philanthropy award. Afterward, a female jurist from Darfur took his hands in hers and with tears in her eyes told him: "You are birthing a great-grandchild. This will change the world."

As recognition goes, says Nickerson simply, "that's enough. I will never forget that moment." ■■■

