

Negotiating a Better World

A Visionary Career as Lawyer and Philanthropist



JIM OLIVERA PHOTOS



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 to the generosity of corporate lawyer and philanthropist Steven Cash Nickerson, JD '85, MBA '93.



LUMNUS STEVEN CASH NICKERSON has built a career as an irrepressible 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, financing a far-reaching initiative to write and implement a treaty banning crimes against humanity.

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 in 2008. Sadat was in the early stages of a bold initiative addressing crimes against humanity.

“I was really struck by the opportunity to do something that the world needs,” Nickerson says. “I thought helping Washington University become more engaged in these efforts would be great for the school and great for the world.”

True to his entrepreneurial spirit, Nickerson’s career path has taken many unexpected turns. When he completed law school in 1985, he signed on with Union Pacific Railroad, where he worked on the company’s merger with the trucking firm Overnite Transportation, which at that time was the largest-ever merger in the transportation industry.

In 1989 he joined the Chicago law firm of Jenner & Block LLP, making partner just three years later. China was opening its economy to capitalist enterprises, and Nickerson worked with Continental Grain Co. on a joint grain elevator venture with a Chinese partner.

From Jenner & Block, he became president and general counsel of a large human resources consulting firm, pursuing an interest that has shaped his career ever since. He soon left there to start his own HR enterprise, Workforce Strategies, in San Francisco. Selling that company, he then opened a law practice with another attorney. Since 2003, he has been principal and chief financial officer of PDS Tech Inc. 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.

“I have seen the law from the perspective of an in-house lawyer, outside lawyer, client, small law partnership, and CFO,” Nickerson says. Along the way, he successfully passed five state bar exams, in California, Texas, Illinois, Nevada, and Nebraska.

As the working world changes, he believes his unconventional career path will become more the norm. “The lawyer of the future will be unlikely to take the organizational path from associate to partner,” he predicts. “In some fashion, lawyers will have to be looking in at the world less and living in it more. Careers will be blends of opportunities. There will

always be big law firms,” he concedes, “but that model’s being challenged now.”

His best advice to new young corporate lawyers is to take every possible opportunity to learn negotiating skills. “The earlier they can get negotiating the better,” he says. “Deals are about negotiations.” In fact, he’s even advised the law school to take students to Cancun, give them \$100, and turn them loose in the mercado. “Have fun with it!” he says with a laugh.

“Great lawyers are great negotiators,” he concludes. “It’s part of our DNA—a high need to negotiate.”

Nickerson also relishes human resources work. “You’re very involved in people’s lives,” he observes. He finds profound satisfaction in helping 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.”

It was his own hurt over the loss of his father to prostate cancer in 1996 that moved him to found David’s Cure, a private foundation to raise research funds. In 2009 David’s Cure held its first fundraiser, a golf tournament, which raised \$25,000 for Washington University School of Medicine’s Siteman Cancer Center, and in 2010 the earnings grew to \$28,000. “We’re off to a good start,” he observes. “We hope to grow.”

But it is on the global stage where Nickerson is more dramatically reaching out to people who hurt through his generous support of the law school’s Crimes Against Humanity Initiative. During the past two and a half years, Sadat and the project’s steering committee have drafted, circulated, and finalized a proposed 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.”

This year Nickerson attended a steering committee meeting at the Brookings Institution, 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.” ■■■