

DAVID WEISSBRODT '69

Human Rights Leader Creates a Legacy



Nineteenth-century American poet Lucy Larcom observed, “If the world seems cold to you, kindle fires to warm it.” Educator and entrepreneur David Weissbrodt '69 has kindled warmth—and change—in the complex world of human rights law.

Weissbrodt's own interest in human rights was ignited by a seminar at Berkeley Law. “In 1968, Dean Frank Newman brought together a group of enthusiastic young scholars with world-renowned human rights advocates,” he recalls. Joining Newman as instructors were rights leaders Egon Schwelb, a prominent attorney whose clients included anti-Nazi German refugees; Thomas Buergenthal, who later served as a judge on the International Court of Justice; and Karel Vasak, the first secretary-general of the International Institute of Human Rights.

Newman later arranged for internships at the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva for Weissbrodt and his wife, Pat Schaffer—who was also in the seminar. “We wrote international analysis for the basis of human rights for East Pakistan, learned about Amnesty International, and worked at the United Nations on human rights issues,” says Weissbrodt.

From there, his path led to a faculty post at the University of Minnesota, where he has taught torts, administrative law, immigration law, and international human rights law for 40 years. “The environment at Minnesota allowed me to take advantage of what I learned from Frank at Berkeley,” says Weissbrodt. “I saw an opportunity to build.”

Eager to inspire future leaders as Newman inspired him, Weissbrodt helped launch the law school's International Human Rights Internship Program in 1976 and its Human Rights Center in 1988. Since the center's founding, it has funneled 538 interns to direct-advocacy assignments and worked with 365 human rights organizations in 91 countries.

Weissbrodt has been an important voice for rights worldwide, with stints at Université Jean Moulin in France, Oxford University, United Nations University in Tokyo, and Monash University Law School in Australia. He also chaired the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights—the first U.S. citizen since Eleanor Roosevelt to head a U.N. human rights organization.

Still, Weissbrodt is especially proud of his work at home in Minnesota, where he co-founded the Advocates for Human Rights in 1983 and the Center for Victims of Torture in 1985. “I've always been pleased to encourage lay people and lawyers in Minnesota to be advocates,” he says.

In 2008, Weissbrodt received Berkeley Law's annual Stefan A. Riesenfeld Award for outstanding contributions to international law. The influence of his wisdom and creative solutions, fueled by the passion he first experienced in Newman's seminar, continues. —Ben Peterson