

CHARTING A NEW COURSE

Bill Kosar, LLB'82, traded in the nine-to-five for a career in international development and never looked back



Bill Kosar (R)

BY ASHLEY RABINOVITCH

“I can count on one hand the number of people who completely changed the course of my life,” shared Bill Kosar. Yuri Luryi, a prominent human rights lawyer who taught a course in Soviet law at Western in the 1970s, was one of them.

Kosar never dreamed of attending law school. He fully intended to pursue a PhD in medieval Russian history before changing direction. He reasoned that his father, the owner of a construction company that was constantly entangled in litigation, would guarantee a first paying client. Kosar did eventually represent his father in several cases, but the interest in international law sparked by Luryi’s class never waned.

After nearly two decades of practising commercial corporate law in his hometown of Hamilton, Ont., Kosar hit a wall. “I hated nearly everything involved in the nine-to-five practice of law,” he said.

He began teaching international business law at McMaster, Ryerson and other universities in the Greater Toronto Area, and accepted an invitation from the United

Nations Development Program to provide a critique of enterprise law on the ground in Vietnam. One opportunity led to another and the rest, they say, is history.

Over the past 15 years, Kosar has built a thriving career in the international development sphere, helping governments, NGOs and private companies with legislative drafting, legal reform, and capacity building in more than 25 countries around the world. As he works in tandem with prominent organizations like United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank and Deloitte Consulting, Kosar marvels at the unexpected adventures that come his way. “How many people can say they’ve had the opportunity to negotiate a multi-billion dollar oil deal for Somalia or meet the King of Thailand?” he said.

Like any career path, the legal niche Kosar has carved out within the international development community comes with its own set of challenges. “It can be difficult to write laws that are not implemented,” he acknowledged. Out of nearly 60 laws he drafted for the fledgling state of South Sudan, roughly 10 have been enacted.

Kosar also points to well-meaning donors who fund projects that lack input from knowledgeable sources on the ground. “I remember when a group of donors funded the drafting of a fabulous 300-page bankruptcy law for the government of Afghanistan,” he said. “Unfortunately, it was never going to work. You have to look at international best practices and take the country’s legal precedent, existing law and local context into account. What works in one country will not necessarily work in another and an overly complicated law can be worse than no law at all.”

Regardless of the difficulties that arise in the course of his work, Kosar said he would “happily do it for free” if he didn’t need to earn a living. “I’m constantly motivated by all the fascinating people I meet and by the impact legislation can make.” Reflecting on a mortgage law in Afghanistan he wrote with local input, Kosar said he thinks about all the people who can now borrow against their homes to expand a business.

He said he thinks, too, about the year he spent working with a committee to craft South Sudan’s environmental protection law from scratch. “The laws that make me the proudest are the laws I didn’t write myself, and that was one of them,” he noted. “My role is ultimately to be a facilitator while local counterparts take ownership. It’s their law, not mine.”

These days, Kosar can hardly keep count of how many laws he has helped draft, but it’s close to 100.

For the past nine years, Kosar has lived in a small fishing village north of Mombasa, Kenya, minutes away from what many consider Africa’s most beautiful beach. As the COVID-19 pandemic prevents him from traveling internationally, he pursues his longtime passion for sailing and lives a simple life with his wife, a Kenyan-born lawyer. Currently, he is working remotely to help revise a variety of commercial laws in South Sudan, Fiji and Myanmar.

“As the pandemic continues, many of us in the international development community have realized that we don’t need to be in the country for everything,” he acknowledged. “Video calls have really revolutionized our line of work.”

Whether his first post-COVID-19 trip takes him on a work assignment across the globe or on a sailing trip across the Equator, Kosar is always ready for the next adventure. “I’m not one to let the grass grow under my feet,” he said.