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Peterson '77 "pulled" by the Pacific

Summary: Jeff Peterson '77, an international business attorney, makes Vancouver his homebase, but his work place may be anywhere in the world.

(March 6, 2007)-University of Minnesota, Morris alumnus Jeff Peterson '77 illustrates his own personal definition of a global citizen: “a ‘nimble’ person, sensitive to differences, comfortable living and working in a variety of countries with dramatically differing cultures.” As an attorney practicing international business law, his work takes him to cities around the world—Hong Kong and Amsterdam, Sydney and Paris. Homebase is Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, a lively, multicultural city surrounded by the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest.

A growing interest in international politics and relations

When Peterson arrived in Morris as a new White Bear Lake High School graduate, world travel and global affairs were not on his mind. A few classes later, he found himself gravitating towards international politics courses taught by the late William Peterfi, professor of political science and a native of Hungary. After backpacking Europe the summer before his senior year, Peterson graduated in 1977 as a political science major with an international relations concentration.

“I wasn’t a particularly good student in high school,” remembers Peterson, “and if I hadn’t discovered UMM and a field like political science to study, I somewhat doubt if I would have graduated. Political science still provides a meaningful foundation for me given my international career and practice.”

After graduating from Georgetown University’s law school in Washington, D.C., Peterson accepted a position with a major law firm in Seattle. Four years later, when an opportunity to work for “Seattle’s premiere international company” presented itself, he grabbed it. As a member of The Boeing Company’s legal department, Peterson traveled the world negotiating aircraft financings. One of those high finance bargaining sessions led to a job offer from “across the table”...and across the Atlantic—a large British law firm.

Broadening perspective

“I lived and worked in London for five and one half years,” shares Peterson. “It was a fantastic experience. Truly ‘law at the top.’ My practice involved aircraft and project financing, Euro syndicated loans, and international transactional work.”

While in London, Peterson completed a master of laws (LL.M.), an internationally recognized postgraduate law degree, specializing in international business law. He remembers that the program required an “enormous amount of reading,” most completed while commuting on the “tube.”

While Peterson gained an advanced degree and valuable professional experience, living abroad also produced less tangible but no less important rewards. “There is enormous value in experiencing other cultures and places,” he asserts. “It greatly broadens one’s perspective on the world and on the United States. Often this underscores the great and the good of the U.S.—our ideals, our values. Sometimes it is an eye opener to discover other ways, ideas, and values. After living in London for several years, I realized that I’d changed far more than my U.S. friends, that my worldview and perspective had expanded so much it might be difficult to return to the U.S. Many ex-pats say that after living abroad for five years, one can never go home again. That overstates it a bit, but there’s truth to the point.”

The pull of the Pacific

Practicing law in Great Britain and living in London was invigorating and challenging, but Peterson began to again feel the pull of the Pacific Northwest. When he—an American citizen—and wife Nickey—a South African citizen—married, they decided to start their life together on neutral territory in Canada. In 1994, he rejoined his original Seattle law firm, accepting a position in its Vancouver office.

“I love the mountains and water of British Columbia. Whistler Mountain—with fantastic skiing—is just over an hour from my house, the ocean and all its wonders a short walk from our door,” says Peterson. “I love the green of the mountains and the blue of the water and the white of the snow. Vancouver itself is an incredibly modern and alive city, stunningly situated.”

Life in Vancouver is rich and full for Peterson and his family—Nickey, Matthew (11) and Tegan (7), but new global adventures always remain a possibility for the future. States Peterson: “I’d be quite open to living and working in Europe for maybe two years to cap off my career, show our kids the continent, and get one more protracted, up close taste of all that is Europe.”

Peterson’s expertise in and attraction to global citizenry does not preclude his appreciation and affection for his place of origin. “If home is where the heart is, in a number of ways, it remains Minnesota,” he reflects. “There’s a lot of one’s heart that’s always devoted to the comfort and familiarity of where one grew up. And now, after living in several countries, I’m a partner in the only U.S. firm with an office in western Canada, Dorsey & Whitney, Minnesota’s largest law firm. I’m on the phone to Minneapolis weekly, if not daily, with the opportunity to return to Minnesota for annual meetings. It truly strikes me as a small world.”

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