



Washington Post

DLA Piper alum launches practice focused on humanitarian issues

By Catherine Ho

July 3, 2011



Jeffrey MacMillan/For Capital Business - Jared Genser's client list reads like a who's who international human rights activists.

Jared Genser, a Washington lawyer who has lobbied to free imprisoned human rights activists, has left DLA Piper to start his own firm focusing on international humanitarian issues.

Formerly a partner in the government affairs practice at one of the world's largest law firms, Genser launched Perseus Strategies LLC last week. The venture is primarily a law firm aimed at helping companies, nonprofits and governments set up humanitarian projects related to international development, global health advocacy and poverty alleviation. It will also provide political consulting services and public relations advocacy.

The firm is a solo practice but may expand later, Genser said. It shares office space with boutique law firm Heideman Nudelman & Kalik at 1146 19th St. NW.

“After a long time at a large law firm, I realized it’s time to set up my own shop to do this kind of work,” said Genser, who joined DLA Piper in 2003. “I’m not aware of any other individual firm out there whose focus is to work at the intersection of nonprofit and private sector on human rights and humanitarian work. It’s a niche practice. The need is profound and will get more profound in years to come.”

At DLA Piper, Genser advised individuals and foundations looking to create humanitarian projects in developing countries, and counseled companies doing work abroad on how to comply with international labor and human rights standards.

His client list reads like a who’s who of international human rights activists and foreign dignitaries: He has represented Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Elie Wiesel, former Czech Republic president Vaclav Havel and former Norwegian prime minister Kjell Magne Bondevik on human rights matters before the United Nations.

Carl Gershman, president of National Endowment for Democracy, met Genser several years ago at a conference where Genser presented a report by Havel and Tutu on human rights abuses in Burma. Gershman was so impressed with Genser’s legal consulting on the project that he suggested creating a similar report on North Korea.

“Within six months from the time I asked him, there was major published report with a whole international legal strategy on the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ doctrine, holding the North Korean government in violation of this new norm of international law,” said Gershman, whose foundation issues grants to nongovernmental organizations promoting democracy abroad. “It was a well-documented, coherent legal strategy and it was very impressive.”

Genser recruited more than \$1 million worth of legal work, mostly young lawyers working pro bono, to research and complete the report, Gershman said.

“He’s a very forceful advocate,” he said. “I would kid him and say I never knew when he did his day job because he was doing so much that was all volunteer.”

While at DLA Piper, Genser had a regular stream of pro bono cases, but leaving big law to branch out on his own will allow him to do more work for clients that can’t afford high legal fees, he said.

“The fee structure of a large law firm like mine makes it hard to do this kind of important work for organizations that don’t have huge amounts of resources,” he said. “Moving to a smaller firm will let me substantially cut my fees and continue to provide the same quality of work for my clients.”

Still, Genser leaves behind a firm with global reach and significant resources for pro bono work. DLA Piper ranks 24th among the nation's 200 highest-grossing firms in terms of pro bono output, according to the most recent survey by ALM Legal Intelligence, which tracks trends in the legal industry.

Separately, Genser heads Freedom Now, the nonprofit he founded in 2001 that works to free "prisoners of conscience." The group is currently representing Liu Xiaobo, the Chinese dissident who was jailed after calling for political reforms in China. Genser created the group after he rallied to secure the release of James Mawdsley, a British activist sentenced to 17 years at a Burmese jail after handing out leaflets about human rights abuses in the Southeast Asian nation. Genser, then a third-year law student, took Mawdsley's case to the United Nations and mobilized members of Congress and the British Parliament to help trigger his release.

"It was an amazing moment for me," said Genser, who was at London Heathrow Airport during the early morning hours of Oct. 21, 2000, to witness Mawdsley reunite with his family after 416 days in solitary confinement. "To help get him out was a real honor and privilege."

Freedom Now later waged a five-year battle to free Yang Jianli, a Chinese dissident blacklisted by the government for testifying before Congress about Tiananmen Square, and later detained after facing charges of being a spy for Taiwan.