

**Adapting** to other cultures comes easily to some people, especially if they're accustomed to moving around. By the time James E. Thompson graduated high school in Grand Haven, Michigan, he had lived in eight American cities, thanks to his father who worked for the U.S. Coast Guard.

Exploring the world beyond the United States seemed like a natural next step, especially for Thompson, a voracious reader of world history and politics. As an undergrad at the University of Michigan, he majored in Russian and East European studies. In law school there, he devoured courses on international law, a subject he was fascinated with.

After law school, that fascination took him to Luxembourg where he became the first American to serve as a law clerk *stagiaire*—French for trainee—at the European Court of Justice, the “Supreme Court” for European Union law. He also spent four months working in Brussels, Belgium as a *stagiaire* with the

Legal Service of the European Commission, the executive body of the European Union.

Back in the United States, his new employers, law firm Jones Day in Washington D.C., heralded his arrival with an intraoffice announcement that said he had just returned from a year of backpacking in Europe—a misrepresentation that still makes him chuckle.

But it wasn't long before they realized his European experience brought some serious added value to the firm. It proved useful in helping Jones Day set up its law offices in Brussels, where Thompson remained as the only U.S. attorney for five years before coming back to the United States.

Upon his return, he held stints at manufacturing and distribution giant Alticor Inc. and later for McLeodUSA Inc., a telecommunications service provider. In 2007, Thompson landed at Chiquita Brands International, taking up the posts of senior

vice president, general counsel, and secretary.

Thompson likes to point out that the Cincinnati-based firm is so much more than bananas. The company is global and multifaceted, which Thompson says is a thrill. Moreover, at Chiquita, his zeal for international law has once again been a boon, this time helping the company navigate one of its toughest legal periods in recent history. In 2007, the firm was fined \$25 million by the U.S. Department of Justice for paying money to right-wing paramilitary groups in Colombia, which are classified by the United States government as terrorist organizations.

“Immediately upon joining the company, I was responsible for supporting the company's full cooperation with the Department of Justice investigation triggered by our board's decision to voluntarily self-disclose that it had been forced to make extortion payments to protect the lives and safety of its employees in Colombia,” Thompson says. He went on to negotiate the company's plea agreement and took responsibility for managing all aspects of Chiquita's Colombia-related legal issues.

Thompson says his greatest strength in dealing with these situations is his curiosity and willingness to learn what other cultures have to offer. “It's about trying to be self-aware of what you know, but also what you don't know,” he says. “Every country around the world has its complexities.”

When he isn't dealing with those complexities, Thompson likes to spend time with his wife, Sandra, and their four sons at their house on Lake Michigan, boating and kayaking. The couple also spend a great deal of time at their sons' sporting events, which run the gamut from football to lacrosse. “Much as I love travel, it's just great to get home and watch the boys in various sports,” he says.

**By Winnie Yu**

## PRACTICING GLOBAL AWARENESS

