Interview with Keck Center Board of Governors Vice Chair Larry R. Schmadeka ’87

By Jonathan Becker ’24

Can you tell me a bit about your career in international law? Was there a particular moment when you realized what you wanted to do? How has your career developed over time?

I always thought that I would like to have a career dealing with an international field like international law and that was the goal when I started law school. When the opportunity came along to join a law firm that represented German and Japanese auto manufacturers, I jumped at it because I like cars and because working with German automobile manufacturers and Japanese auto manufacturers may lend some exposure to international issues. Although ninety percent of the time you're dealing with United States domestic laws, ten percent of the time, you may be dealing with some international or foreign law issue, like Hague Convention issues, service abroad issues, or foreign shield laws relating to discovery. From there, I branched off in the same group but with a different law firm, still in the automobile industry. We worked on bringing a Korean automobile conglomerate to the United States. That is when I started working more with Korean companies instead of Japanese or German companies. I believe that because my family background has Asian roots, I've always had an interest in working with Asian companies seeking to do business in the United States. Later, I began representing clients from Taiwan and Greater China. Having an international background helped me move into other areas when opportunities presented themselves, such as international arbitration and international business matters.

The Keck Center (and CMC's IR major) definitely emphasize foreign languages and understanding different cultures. Can you talk about how having a deep knowledge of language and culture helped you in your career and life in general?

I was born in Taiwan, the son of an American serviceman and a Chinese national in Taiwan. Coming to the United States at a very young age while still having family in Taiwan, as well as in Mainland China, I formed an interest in international affairs. As a young kid, I went to visit Taiwan. I remember when I was 10 years old, running around in Taipei for a while and meeting with relatives and my father’s friends who had returned to Taiwan after military service with their Taiwanese spouses to teach at the American school. Beginning in my high school years, my grandparents from Taiwan lived with us six months of every year in the United States, and so I was getting to know the culture more deeply in a daily living situation. A daily living situation brings with it linguistic and cultural challenges that you have to learn to navigate. Around that time, I also had a cousin from my Taiwan side who was a Taiwanese diplomat, and another more distant cousin from the PRC who often stayed with us and was one of the first Ph.D. students in the United States. So I’ve long had an interest along those lines. I do think language is important; it's a window to the culture. It is important to try to learn languages, even in a fumbling way, because by attempting to learn the language and attempting to communicate in that
During your time at CMC, do any specific experiences, classes, or professors stick out as particularly memorable?

Almost all of my professors were memorable, but some were more memorable than others. I graduated in 1987, but there is hardly a day when I don't think about at least one of our professors. That's because when you're at CMC you're learning life lessons, not just learning the subject matter. In particular, I think often about CMC Professors Bill Rood, Arthur Rosenbaum, Ed Haley, and Ricardo Quinones, and Pomona Professor Sharon Hou. I also remember often Coach Pat Murphy, for whom I played baseball at Claremont. I think about what I learned from them a lot.

Did you have any specific experiences or classes that stick out to you as especially entertaining?

Anyone who took Bill Rood's class would remember that the take-home final kept us in the library for about a week and a half. We would have to find two or three sources related to certain arcane terms that he would give us, and people would go to great lengths to find these terms. In the days before Google, that meant we had to turn the library upside down, much to the chagrin of the librarians. I recall once trying to track down a term that I believed to be a naval term, and I started making phone calls to Pearl Harbor. I actually worked my way down to several people. I finally got a guy on the phone who could lead me in the right direction, and he actually asked me "how the hell did you get this number?" I finished that conversation and lived in fear for a couple of days of men in dark suits showing up at my door.

Do you have any advice to CMC students interested in a similar career path as yours, especially those looking to work abroad? What sorts of opportunities/internships do you recommend they look into and what sorts of skills are most important to develop?

There is so much information out there now, much more than there was in the 1980s. I would really recommend using the resources that CMC has, especially at the Keck Center, to ferret out those opportunities. There are also so many alumni. If I were a CMC student right now and wanted to talk about getting into some type of international business field, I'd be picking up the phone and talking to Jim Bemowski, Paul Nathan, and Andrew Oliver. I'd be on their doorstep trying to figure out how to do this. You can also go to law school to become a lawyer, but that doesn't mean you necessarily have to do law. I've known lawyers who ended up joining the Foreign Service and working in embassies, or NGOs abroad. Whatever you choose to do, whether you go to medical school, or law school, or business school, if you're looking for international opportunities, you just have to keep your ear to the ground.
What are some of the specific challenges that you deal with as an international lawyer and find particularly interesting?

I want to start by defining the concept of international law. There is true international law, but what I tend to do has more to do with representing international clientele in pursuit of their legal interests abroad. When trying to represent international clients domestically, one important component is education. You must educate them about business practices and legal practices in the United States while trying to be sensitive to their cultural backgrounds and needs. In going abroad, the challenge is finding competent counsel. The practice of law, like anything else in the industry of business, is held to different standards in different parts of the world. You have to understand how lawyers are perceived, in other words where do they stand in the corporate hierarchy as well in the societal hierarchy? How are laws perceived and what is the rule of law in those countries? You have to understand the differences in laws. For example, it could be as simple as whether it is a common law country or a civil law country. And coming from CMC where critical thinking is prized, it is important to be well-equipped for the challenge of dealing with new laws, new cultures, and new business situations that may be present in a foreign country. That challenge speaks to us and we enjoy that.