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Up & Coming Lawyers 2007

Michael C. Rakower Promoting human rights in Africa

Special Feature

Up and Coming Lawyers

Lawyers USA has identified eight lawyers out of thousands across the nation who are on the fast track to making a significant impact on the profession.

By Dick Dahl
Staff writer

Ask Michael C. Rakower what kinds of cases he prefers to handle, and he's quick with an answer.

"I prefer to do David-and-Goliath cases – where I represent David," he says. "My goal is to represent little guys against the big guys."

At 35, Rakower creating a reputation for himself doing just that in New York City, where he has a solo practice in midtown Manhattan and an of-counsel relationship with two law firms. He handles high-profile cases involving police misconduct, asbestos exposure, whistleblowing, prisoners' rights and an alleged bribery/kickback scheme at the United Nations.

But it took Rakower a few years to settle on his current course.

He received his J.D. from the University of Virginia School of Law and took his first law job as a transactional attorney in a big New York City law firm, Latham & Watkins. Two years later, though, Rakower knew the time had come to make a change.

The year was 2001 and Rakower had begun doing pro bono work on the side, including an immigration case in which he won asylum for two Tibetan refugees

"It became more and more apparent that I wanted to be a litigator, and that I needed a different path," he recalled.

He and his attorney wife, Sali Rakower, an associate at White & Case in New York, knew a person in Africa who had connections in Tanzania with the United Nations' Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), which was established to prosecute individuals responsible for the 1994 genocide in that country.

"We were looking for an experience, something that would teach us, inspire us," Rakower said.

They committed themselves to the journey – and then learned that their colleague wouldn't be able to help them get positions with the ICTR after all.

But their course had been charted, and the Rakowers embarked on their adventure without any assurance of success. They bought one-way tickets to Cape Town, South Africa, where they bought a pickup truck and camping equipment. When they arrived in Arusha, Tanzania, they befriended a security officer who let them use the Tribunal's library, where they sent a flurry of e-mails to officials within the Tribunal in an attempt to convince them of their qualifications.

The effort succeeded, and the Rakowers assisted in the prosecutions. Rakower twice went on missions to Rwanda for the



Michael C. Rakower

U.N. to interview genocide survivors and determine who would make good trial witnesses.

He also established a program to deal with the "revolving door" problem at the ICTR, creating a database of institutional knowledge – attorney notes, scholarly texts, testimony – to hasten the education of the constant parade of new attorneys.

Returning to New York, Rakower eased his way back into the world of litigation by clerking for Judge Richard C. Wesley of the 2nd Circuit, then opened his solo practice. Soon after, he lined up of-counsel positions with Constantine Cannon and the Law Offices of Gordon Mehler, both in New York City.

Although Rakower left Africa, he hasn't forgotten it. He regularly talks to students about the Rwandan genocide and the role of international criminal tribunals.

He's also keeping in touch as a board member of American Friends for the Kigali Public Library, a nonprofit organization that is building Kigali's first public library.

Questions or comments can be directed to the writer at: dick.dahl@lawyersusaonline.com