

April 13, 2015

## In Ghana, answers come through the villagers' lens

By Jack Silverstein  
Law Bulletin staff writer

The children were on the cocoa plantation, in the market selling goods, at their family farms — anywhere, it seemed, but in [Joseph W. Barber's](#) classroom.

It was 2003, and Barber was in Ghana as part of the Peace Corps. He was teaching high school math and science, and he noticed that only about 60 percent of school-age children attended class.

"These parents are doing something wrong," Barber couldn't help thinking.

He started asking why.

In doing so, he looked at the village through the eyes of the villagers.

Barber, who in December became a shareholder at Howard & Howard Attorneys PLLC, was searching for answers. He knew they would unlock his teaching potential.

He didn't know they would unlock his career.

### **From Beverly to Ghana**

The roots of Barber's work in the law stems from volunteerism.

Now 36, he grew up in the Beverly neighborhood and attended Morgan Park High School. While there, he was involved in his school's version of the Kiwanis Club, the worldwide group of volunteer social service providers.

After earning an engineering degree at Northwestern University, Barber volunteered at and then was hired by Prairie State Legal Services in Waukegan.

"I was realizing that being an engineer is more numbers-based, and I wanted to move away from numbers as a way of expressing myself and use words instead," he said.

His intuition was rewarded — legal work satisfied his drive for professionalism, intellectual pursuits and public service. He applied to both the Peace Corps and law school and was accepted to both around the same time.

“I came to the conclusion that it would be much easier to live abroad in a third-world country and then come back and go to law school than the other way around,” he said.

Barber requested to go to Africa. He was assigned the West African nation of Ghana. He arrived in June 2003.

Immediately, he noticed cultural differences.

Ghanaians, for instance, name their children based on which day of the week the child is born, with seven corresponding names for girls and boys. They focused solely on the day’s work — as opposed to Barber’s goal-oriented, forward-thinking lifestyle.

He worked at the Sefwi Asawinso Senior High School and became close with the school’s assistant headmaster. He ate dinner nearly every night with the man’s family and helped his children with their homework.

“You’ve moved to a place where you don’t know anyone, with a completely different culture, and it’s up to you as an individual to make new friends both personally and professionally,” said Robert Marshall, who was in his second and final year in the Peace Corps in Ghana when Barber arrived.

Though they were stationed eight hours from each other, they had enough interaction for Marshall to see Barber’s acclimation.

“It was clear that he was very quick to get to know people and figure out common interests,” he said. “It’s a great skill to have when you’re all alone in a new country.”

Soon, Barber understood why so many kids weren’t coming to class.

“What I found was that they can make more money farming, so there is no necessary reason to go to school,” Barber said.

College was too expensive for most of those children, so their work on the farms and in the markets didn’t just provide money to their families — it formed the foundation for their futures.

So, Barber reframed his lessons around the needs of his students.

Did you know, he asked them, that science can help increase your crop yield? That math will improve your understanding of your product’s value? That communication and literacy skills will help you negotiate at market?

That was his breakthrough.

“They just became more receptive,” Barber said. “It made me try to step back and realize that in order to be an effective communicator and change agent, you cannot just impose your thoughts on the community.”

### **Teacher to student to teacher**

In 2008, Barber earned his J.D. from the University of Illinois College of Law and began his legal career with The Patterson Law Firm. He moved to Howard & Howard in 2011. His practice covers intellectual property and corporate commercial litigation.

He doesn’t talk about his Peace Corps experience unless specifically pressed. But its impact is evident, said fellow shareholder [Jude M. Sullivan](#).

“He’s got a much better worldview than a lot of people have ... from the Peace Corps,” Sullivan said. “Joe’s got no problem being on the corporation side of commercial litigation. Joe’s got no problem with people being capitalists and making money. But he’s also a guy who cares a lot about social equity in the world.”

Barber sees no contradiction between his practice and his Peace Corps experience. He sees only the correlation.

“What it taught me was the ability to put myself in somebody else’s shoes and see problems and issues from their perspective,” he said.

It also developed his teaching skills. He saves those now for juries.

“Being on trial is the entertaining part of practice because you get to be a teacher,” he said. “The idea is to have (jurors) accept your story — your version of the events — and apply those events to the law as it’s been interpreted.”

When that happens, he’s as happy as a Ghanaian boy using new math skills to sell cocoa seeds.

©2015 by Law Bulletin Publishing Company. Content on this site is protected by the copyright laws of the United States. The copyright laws prohibit any copying, redistributing, or retransmitting of any copyright-protected material. The content is NOT WARRANTED as to quality, accuracy or completeness, but is believed to be accurate at the time of compilation. Websites for other organizations are referenced at this site; however, the Law Bulletin does not endorse or imply endorsement as to the content of these websites. By using this site you agree to the [Terms, Conditions and Disclaimer](#). Law Bulletin Publishing Company values its customers and has a [Privacy Policy](#) for users of this website.