

University of Kentucky Alumni Association

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J. DAVID ROSENBERG:



PAYING IT FORWARD



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J. David Rosenberg gives back to the UK College of Law in a big way

By Robin Roenker

In November, the University of Kentucky College of Law announced a \$20 million gift from J. David Rosenberg '73 LAW and his wife, Dianne. It represented the largest-ever single gift to the College of Law and the third largest in the University of Kentucky's history.

The endowment will be used to provide merit scholarships for outstanding law students, recruit and retain world-class law faculty and support specific college initiatives, such as enhancing law student career services and on-campus law symposia events.

In recognition of the couple's generosity, the college has been renamed the

University of Kentucky J. David Rosenberg College of Law.

For Rosenberg, a Lexington native and senior partner at Cincinnati law firm Keating Muething & Klekamp (KMK), having the college share his name is, of course, an honor.

But it's the lasting legacy his gift will make possible that's the true reward.

"Most of the beneficiaries of this endowment — the students and faculty that will benefit from it — I will never have the pleasure of knowing," said Rosenberg, 70, who has enjoyed a long and successful career in law and finance.

"For as long as I'm able, I hope to get to

meet them. But I'm realistic that this will go on many decades after me," he said. "Knowing that I will have helped people that I will never know, and that they will become some of the finest lawyers, judges and community leaders in Kentucky and beyond — that's my hope for this gift."

Valuable learning

Rosenberg grew up modestly in Lexington, working behind the counter of Rosenberg's, his parents' small, family-run business on South Limestone that sold jewelry, leather goods and luggage. (Joe Rosenberg Jewelers and several

Photos: Mark Cornelison and Pete Comparoni, UK Public Relations & Marketing

Law students walk across campus with J. David Rosenberg, who has made scholarship support a key priority of his endowment so that students can follow their dreams and achieve at the University of Kentucky.

other downtown businesses were owned by his fathers' relatives.)

From a young age, Rosenberg helped daily in his parents' store, eventually taking on full responsibility for the bookkeeping by the time he was in seventh grade.

"We were a tiny mom-and-pop business," said Rosenberg, who graduated from Lexington's Henry Clay High School in 1967. "But working there taught me a lot about life and business, which was great preparation for the career that I've had."

That career today at KMK focuses mainly on corporate finance. It was fellow alum Richard Siegel '71 LAW, who recruited Rosenberg to join KMK following his UK graduation. In his more than 45 years at the firm, Rosenberg has established himself as one of the region's leading authorities in the practice of law as it relates to corporate finance, venture capital, banking and reorganization. He is known for independent, sound judgment.

Rosenberg's father immigrated to Lexington from Eastern Europe as a six-year-old boy with his family in 1904. His mother, who was quite a bit younger, met his father after moving to Lexington in her 20s. She had come to the city to manage a millinery department during World War II.

Rosenberg's parents' lives had each been shaped by hardship. His father's family fled to America to escape anti-Semitism and poverty, while his mother's family had been devastated by the Depression.

Despite owning their own business in operation from 1905 to 1987, the family's financial means were limited. Looking back, Rosenberg feels certain he wouldn't have attended the UK College of Law had it not been located in Lexington and so affordable at the time of his enrollment.

"My tuition my first semester at law school was \$165, and I was able to graduate in two and a half years. By my last semester, I think tuition had gone up to \$200. I lived at home at my parents' house, which means that I was able to attend law school for a little under \$1,000," said Rosenberg, who earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School of Finance in 1971.

"In the investment world, I generally am

a 'value investor.'" Rosenberg said. "The best value I ever got was my UK Law School education."

His desire to assist today's students, who often take on thousands of dollars of student debt in pursuit of a law degree, was one motivating factor in the decision to make scholarship support a key priority of his endowment.

"I feel badly when I hear about law school students today being indebted, between college and law school, in the six figures. I would not have had the confidence to take on that level of debt," Rosenberg told UK Public Relations staff members Carl Nathe and Amy Jones-Timoney in a "Behind the Blue" podcast interview following the college renaming ceremony.

Even with today's higher tuition costs, the College of Law is routinely named among the best-value law schools in the nation, including a 2019 Top 5 spot for value, as ranked by the National Jurist Pre-Law magazine. That fact is something Rosenberg relishes.

"I take a lot of pride in that," he said. "UK College of Law is an excellent law school. The value ranking looks at the cost of the school, the number of graduates who pass a bar exam and the percentage of graduates who have a law-related job within one year of taking the bar exam. UK has ranked in the Top 10 for the last decade or so."

Reflecting on his gift in November and how it can continue and expand on UK's tra-

dition of excellence, Rosenberg was asked by Nathe what he hoped the endowment might accomplish in 20 or 40 years.

"What would success look like? I would hope that students considering going to law school that were intellectually excellent and were passionate about justice and a fair society and government — but who might not have gone to law school or might not have gone to this College of Law — would have been graduated from this school and would go on to have an impact," Rosenberg said. "That impact could come in the representation of clients or in their impact on their communities, from the local PTA and school board to state and federal courts, state government or working in Washington or anywhere in the world.

"If the University of Kentucky College of Law sees more of those graduates, and if my endowment had an impact on them getting the kind of education and values that I believe this law school imparts, then I will be gratified," he said. "My dream is to build upon this college's legacy of excellence, expand it for students, faculty, the state and the nation it serves."

Guardians of justice

Rosenberg sees law as a calling.

Growing up, as he did, in a Jewish family where relatives' lives had been shaped by anti-Semitism and violence in countries without legal order or democratic rule of



The official signing day for the Rosenberg gift took place in October. Front Row (left to right) are Dianne Rosenberg and J. David Rosenberg, donors to the University of Kentucky; and Dr. Eli Capilouto, UK president. Second Row are Tom Barker, senior executive director of gift & estate planning; Mary J. Davis, interim dean of the J. David Rosenberg College of Law; David W. Blackwell, UK provost and chief academic officer; and Michael Richey, vice president for philanthropy and alumni engagement.

law, the very notion of democracy is precious to him.

“Lawyers play a critically important role in society and to the flourishing of democracy,” Rosenberg said. “Lawyers make a difference in our society. When societies go awry — and as a Jew I’ve always been concerned with this — it’s because lawyers failed in some way. Justice is important, and lawyers in many ways are the professional guardians of that.”

As a student at the College of Law between 1971 and 1973, Rosenberg was immersed in a community of fellow students and law professors who, like him, believed fervently that “lawyers are critical to an orderly and just society,” he said.

Looking back, he credits his UK professors for making a profound impact on his understanding and practice of law.

“My professors at UK were outstanding intellectual scholars,” Rosenberg said, naming several — including Wilburt “Burt” Ham, Paul Oberst, Bob Lawson, Bill Fortune, Steve Vasek, Rutheford “Biff” Campbell and Garrett Flickinger — who made lasting impressions.

“Burt Ham was legendary for his corporations class and he also taught contracts law,” Rosenberg said. “We would joke, because there was a photocopied outline of his class that would get passed down from class to class, which we called a ‘Hamogram.’ I’m convinced that two generations of lawyers practiced business law in Kentucky with a Hamogram in the top drawer of their desk.”

While Rosenberg’s years as a law student were deeply influential, they weren’t his first exposure to the University of Kentucky academic community.

As a high school student, Rosenberg was actively involved on his high school debate team and an eager annual participant in a summertime debate institute then hosted on the UK campus. Often, faculty in the College of Law served as judges at the event, so Rosenberg arrived as a first-year law student already well acquainted with some of the college’s professors.

“The summer high school debate program was my first exposure to UK. I attended that two-week institute during three summers,” he said, recalling vividly that many of the sessions were held without air-conditioning in Lafferty Hall, the former home of the UK College of Law before its current building on Limestone was completed in 1965.



Mary J. Davis, interim dean and the Ashland-Spears Distinguished Research Professor of Law, met with J. David Rosenberg during one of his campus visits. Rosenberg said that he wants his \$20 million gift to the college to help fund, as he put it, “what goes on within the building.”

“I credit the UK debate institute with teaching me logic, research, organization and critical thinking,” he said. “Those summer experiences were hugely valuable to me.”

Giving back

The importance of philanthropy was instilled in Rosenberg early on, he said, both as part of his Jewish faith and through the example his parents set for him.

“In my tradition, I believe we are called upon to complete the unfinished work of creation,” he said. “We are instructed in the sacred text of the Talmud from 2,000 years ago that ‘It is not up to you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.’ From a young age, I understood that there was a responsibility to give back and to help those who were less fortunate. There was always the concern for others.”

While Rosenberg acknowledges the value and beauty of the new state-of-the-art UK law school building — its \$56 million expansion and renovation was officially unveiled last November — he knew he wanted his gift to fund, as he put it, “what goes on within the building.”

“My passion wasn’t bricks and mortar. My passion is teaching, students, scholarship, and mentoring,” he said. “And so, I

began to think this gift could be an opportunity to make a bold statement about the value of legal education, and of justice and the fact that this was a way to give back to the University of Kentucky in Lexington where I grew up and my family lived for a century. All those goals coalesced.

“There is a saying that ‘education is an unfinished symphony.’ We make music to stir hearts and minds, to force us to remember and compel us to commit to ideas larger than ourselves. We invest in education to honor those upon whose shoulders we stand, who made our success possible, but also as an investment of faith in the future, the idea that what today’s students will compose and create as lawyers, legislators, judges and community leaders — ideas, laws and public policy — will deepen not only our understanding of the law, but how our society can be more just.”

In addition to the gift to UK, Rosenberg and his wife, Dianne, have supported numerous other civic and philanthropic projects, particularly in Cincinnati, where Rosenberg has practiced at KMK since 1974, and which is Dianne’s hometown.

The couple have been married for 33 years and share an extended family, including a daughter and two grandchildren, who live in Boston. The Rosenbergs are active members in the Cincinnati Jewish community and have been passionate supporters of Cincinnati’s performing arts community, pre-school literacy initiatives, public schools and parks.

In recent years, the couple donated \$1 million to Cincinnati Parks to help fund family-size “porch” swings at the city’s Smale Riverfront Park. They have quickly become a popular gathering destination.

“During the summer on Monday mornings, I’ll come into work and frequently have an email from somebody I’ve never met, sharing a photo of their grandchildren enjoying the ‘Rosenberg swings,’” he said.

They are also fervent advocates of the Ohio Innocence Project (OIP) — which works to exonerate inmates who have been wrongly convicted — and last year underwrote Cincinnati Opera’s production of a new opera based on the book “Blind Injustice” by OIP director and University of Cincinnati law professor Mark Godsey.

“My wife and I were proud to have underwritten that production,” Rosenberg said. “We’re proud to support the Innocence Project. It’s part of our commitment to justice.”



Designed for enhanced teaching and learning

A ribbon-cutting ceremony last November marked the reopening of the law building following a two-year, \$56 million renovation and expansion. The original building was constructed in 1965. Features of the renovated building include:

- New main entrance with a two-story portico
- Footprint increased 26 percent to 122,513 square feet
- Modernized 185-seat G. Chad Perry III '51 Grand Courtroom for oral argument training, live court proceedings, lectures and conferences
- New small moot courtroom for litigation training
- Eleven new classrooms
- High-tech enhancements to all study spaces and classrooms
- Stites and Harbison PLLC Main Commons on the second floor
- The Honorable William S. Cooper '70 Classrooms (three medium classrooms that can be converted into one large multipurpose room)
- Two terraces (one on the second floor and another on the third)
- Central location for all administrators and student support staff on the first floor in the Jo McCown Ferguson Dean's Administration Suite, named in conjunction with a gift from UK Trustee Emeritus C.M. "Bill" Gatton

In announcing the Rosenbergs' \$20 million endowment for the College of Law, UK President Eli Capilouto noted how he and Rosenberg had met months ago to discuss early planning for the gift, but ended up bonding and becoming friends thanks to their shared backgrounds. Both men grew up Jewish in the South to families who had immigrated to America around the same time, forging in each a deep reverence for equality, justice and the possibilities that access to education can provide.

"David and I are descendants of those without an education driven to make certain

their children and their children's children would know its promise," Capilouto said.

"Motivated by their resolute belief in what is possible, David and Dianne are investing in the enormous potential of our students," Capilouto added. "The magnitude of their gift is surpassed only by the thoroughness of their humility and grace. To know them is to understand intuitively the meaning of 'cheerful giver.'"

"David Rosenberg's story is a relentless, passionate commitment to excellence — intellectually, professionally and personally — through commitment to those cases and

communities that have mattered to him and Dianne throughout their lives," College of Law Interim Dean Mary Davis said at the college's renaming ceremony.

"This gift is about law students and the future that they will shape," Rosenberg said. "I've been fortunate, as has my wife. I did not grow up highly affluent. But I've lived the American dream because of the bold decisions, hard work and sacrifices of my parents and ancestors. I understand how blessed and fortunate I am." ■