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Alumni Spotlight: Nicholas Leach (J.D.'85)

News @ Georgia Law November 2011 Alumni Profile

Name: Nicholas N. Leach
Title: Chief Intellectual Property Counsel
Employer: Chevron Corporation
Location: San Ramon, Calif.
Number of years at this position: 4.5
Georgia Law graduation year: 1985
Other degree(s)/institution(s)/year(s): Bachelors of Mechanical Engineering / Georgia Institute of Technology / 1982



1. What is your most memorable experience from your time at Georgia Law?

- I have numerous positive memories from my three years at UGA. Graduation was a great day, of course. And serving as president of the UGA chapter of the Black Law Students Association was a really satisfying experience. But I think one experience that has served me well throughout my career was my participation in moot court. Although my involvement was relatively brief, it left an important impression in that it highlighted my need to understand both sides of a given legal issue and develop the ability to advance legal positions that did not line up with my personal views. I have used those lessons learned on many occasions in my career.

2. Where was your favorite place to study during law school?

- This was before laptops, iPads and Wi-Fi networks were everywhere. So, I may sound a little old school, but I actually enjoyed studying in the law library. I tended to look for space in the main study area. I also worked part-time in the library to earn a few dollars to help pay for school, so I spent a good bit of time in the law library.

3. What advice would you give to someone wanting to work in your field?

Although there is a lot of information available today describing the difficulties many law school graduates are having in finding their desired legal positions after graduation, I continue to believe this to be a profession that can provide a thoroughly satisfying career. I would encourage law students to challenge themselves to not only take the time necessary to comprehend the complex legal principles taught in the classroom, but also to devote time to understanding their individual interests and strengths. It is that understanding of self that, in my view, provides the greatest opportunity to marry what you learn in law school with a legal practice that speaks to your beliefs and dreams. I also encourage students to read voraciously and write as much as you can. Effective communication skills are critical for practicing lawyers.

4. Please give a brief description of your responsibilities as chief intellectual property counsel for Chevron Corporation.

- As chief IP counsel, I manage a group of IP professionals that provides legal support for Chevron business units across the globe. Chevron's Intellectual Property Practice Group consists of IP attorneys, patent agents, legal and IP analysts, and support staff. Our practice encompasses the full range of IP areas, including patent, trade secret, trademark, copyright, domain name, Internet, technology transfer, licensing and litigation matters. I and others in the IP Practice Group work directly with Chevron's global IP manager to develop and implement IP management strategies for Chevron's key technologies.

5. What do you enjoy most about your job? What is the most rewarding aspect?

- I have had the good fortune of working in an area of law that necessarily exposes me to truly brilliant, forward-thinking scientists, engineers and other individuals who see themselves as trailblazers and problem solvers. Being regularly exposed to people who routinely look for new solutions to existing problems, or answers to questions others aren't even asking, has greatly influenced my approach to the practice of law. Combining this with the broad scope of Chevron's global operations makes it relatively easy for me to get going every morning!

6. What made you decide to pursue a career in intellectual property law?

- With an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering, practicing intellectual property law provided the most straightforward way for me to combine my personal interest in technology with the practice of law. After completing a summer internship in an in-house patent department after my second year at UGA, I was convinced that intellectual property was the right area for me to pursue professionally. It has been and continues to be an interesting ride.

7. What is one of the greatest challenges facing your field right now?

- On September 26, 2011, President Obama signed the Leahy-Smith America Invents Act into law, enacting the most significant changes to U.S. patent law since the 1952 Patent Act. As a U.S. patent attorney, and manager of a group of patent practitioners largely responsible for developing and maintaining Chevron's patent portfolio, this new law presents real challenges in advising business clients on how to optimize current patent practices in response to the new law. A big part of my job going forward will be to understand how Chevron can take full advantage of new procedures that are now or will become available in the U.S. Patent & Trademark Office and federal courts in the next 16 months.

8. What do you enjoy doing in your free time? What are your hobbies?

- I work out several times each week (I'm a fan of the Power 90 fitness program), which is my main stress reliever. I also began riding motorcycles three years ago and try to get out on one of my bikes as frequently as I can, either on one of the many great roads here in California or on the track. I've found no better way to take my mind off work issues than a long day of motorcycle riding. I also have developed a habit of taking a book with me whenever I travel on business, which allows me to take advantage of the delays and layovers in airports that are fairly common today.

9. If you could share an afternoon with anyone, with whom would you choose to spend it?

- I would spend an afternoon with my father, who passed away a little over 10 years ago. I continue to learn from him to this day.

10. What would you consider your greatest accomplishment in life?

- I have two personal accomplishments that I consider great - raising my two sons, Nick and Colin, with lots of help from their mother, Leah, other family members and friends. Nick is a sophomore at USC in Los Angeles and Colin is a sophomore at the Head-Royce School in Oakland. Professionally, it's a bit more difficult to go into much detail due to confidentiality restrictions. But I have during my career been directly involved in IP litigation proceedings in courts located on six continents, which is something I'm proud of.

11. How do you stay up to date on legal issues and trends?

- I regularly read a number of trade publications, such as Managing IP, World Intellectual Property Review and Intellectual Asset Management, various blogs, law firm electronic newsletters, and occasionally law journal articles. As intellectual property has become a more prominent business asset, particularly to technology companies, articles on intellectual property issues have become easy to find in business and mainstream media publications as well. I also participate in panel discussions and attend meetings and seminars of the American Intellectual Property Lawyers Association, Association of Corporate Patent Counsel, Intellectual Property Owners' Association and Minority Corporate Counsel Association.