

Paul Barringer: General Counsel for Common Good

GCC Profile

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By Kenneth Davis

While working for his family's business, Paul Barringer made the decision to enter the legal profession. His motivations sprang more from a sense of practicality and necessity than from any deep aspirations to become a lawyer.



Paul Barringer

"My father died when I was 20, and we had the family fertilizer business in Sanford, North Carolina," Barringer said. "And I found as we went through that process of trying to move on with the business that year that an understanding of the law was really critical to getting things done and realized that that skill and credential was something I really wanted to have for myself."

Barringer now brings the same sense of pragmatism to his job as General Counsel for Common Good, a nonpartisan coalition dedicated to creating policy solutions to restore rationality and common sense to American law and policy.

"We were set up a couple of years ago by Philip Howard, who was a lawyer and author and civic activist in New York City," Barringer said. "He had written a couple of books in the 90s that got a lot of attention about the ways in which

the American legal system is distorting public institutions and affecting individual behavior. And growing out of that, we've undertaken several initiatives in education, civil justice, and in healthcare."

Barringer said that in recent years, the organization has focused on promoting the idea of developing support for specialized courts for medical-injury litigation. For the last few years, Common Good has been working with the Harvard School of Public Health on the initiative to develop a proposal for what a system of health courts might look like. The initiative is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a prominent healthcare foundation.

"We've been reaching out to a lot of different stakeholders around the country who have an interest in patient safety, in healthcare quality, and liability reform to cultivate interest and to generate support in this evolving idea," said Barringer, who has provided testimony about the health-court proposal before Congress and at the state level.

He said that the organization is also currently working in the area of education in an effort to build awareness of the ways in which the legal system, as well as regulatory burdens, have impacted the abilities of teachers and principals to lead schools and teach children.

Barringer, who has been the general counsel for Common Good for two and a half years, discussed what attracted him to the organization:

"It was my interest in healthcare quality and healthcare policy issues, coupled with an opportunity to do something in the advocacy area that's also very entrepreneurial."

Barringer went on quite an odyssey prior to joining Common Good. After he graduated from high school, he spent a year in England. When he got back, he entered Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina, where he pursued an interdisciplinary major that focused on history and environmental history. Halfway through his undergraduate studies, he took a year off to help with the family business. He then returned to Davidson and resumed his education, earning his B.A. in 1990. Following graduation, he traveled on a grant to Nepal and Bangladesh to conduct some research on environmental issues.

After returning from Asia, Davidson entered the University of North Carolina School of Law at Chapel Hill but stopped midway through the program to earn a master's degree in public affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. He then came back to the University of North Carolina and earned his law degree in 1995. After graduation, he worked for a short time at Bristol-Myers Squibb, where he concentrated on health-policy issues.

"And then I had a fellowship to go to the University of Wellington in New Zealand for a year, studying and working on health-policy issues there," Barringer said.

He earned a master's in commerce and administration from the institution before heading back to the states. Once he returned, he joined international law firm Hogan & Hartson in its Washington, DC, office. There, he practiced health law.

After working at the firm for a few years, he decided to go on a new adventure: he took a year off from law and hiked the Appalachian Trail, traveled to India,

and bicycled across the United States. When he returned, he joined Smith Anderson, LLP, in Raleigh, North Carolina, and practiced health law. After working at Smith Anderson for about two years, he left to do healthcare consulting, and in January 2005, he joined Common Good as general counsel.

Barringer discussed what he enjoys most about his job at Common Good:

"Well, I have a passion for healthcare-quality and healthcare-policy issues," he said. "And it's a lot of fun to work with different people around the country in trying to bring about proactive positive reforms to healthcare systems."

Barringer said one of the people who has had a significant influence on him is Uwe Reinhardt, one of his graduate-school professors.

"Uwe Reinhardt is always inspiring from the standpoint of being just an incredible leader in healthcare," he said. "Dennis O'Leary of the Joint Commission is fantastic, too. And there are a lot of people out there who are great in healthcare. It's my privilege, it's an honor, it's a pleasure, it's a lot of fun to work and interact with people that are just fantastic, really smart, really committed, and really passionate about what they do."

Q. What are your hobbies and interests?

A. I play the piano—mostly improvisational jazz. I grow apples—organic heirloom apples. I ride my bike six miles to work every day. That's not really a hobby and interest, but it's something I do every day.

Q. What CD was most recently in your CD player?

A. Keith Jarrett is my favorite piano player. He's awesome; that dude can play some music. And I've always liked Dave McKenna. I also really like country music because I'm from the country; I grew up on a farm.

Q. What's the last magazine you read?

A. *North Carolina Wildlife*.

A. To the Manor Born and Entourage.

Barringer, who works in Common Good's Washington, DC, office, speaks frequently at conferences and events and represents the organization's perspective on health- and legal-reform issues in media interviews. He has published articles in the *National Law Journal*, *American Outlook*, the *BNA Health Law Reporter*, and numerous other publications.

He had the following advice for students interested in pursuing in-house careers:

"I think it's a good idea to study hard and learn as much as you can in school. And it's also a good idea to get really substantive experience that allows you to make the switch from working in a law firm environment to working in other environments."

Barringer was born and raised in Sanford, North Carolina. He has been married for 10 years and has two children, a boy (five) and a girl (one).

He discussed the professional goals he'd like to accomplish in the next few years:

"Well, certainly in connection with the work that I'm doing right now, we'd like to continue to raise the visibility of the health-court proposal as a viable alternative in the medical liability area," Barringer said. "And I think we've seen a lot of success with that, and we'll continue to do that."

On the net

Common Good

cgood.org/index.html

Harvard School of Public Health

www.hsph.harvard.edu

Hogan & Hartson

www.hhlaw.com