

Bringing General Counsel Leadership Into The Nonprofit World

The Editor interviews **Frank M. Leshner**, former Executive Vice President, General Counsel & Secretary, Sony Electronics and currently President of the Greater North Jersey Chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

Editor: Please tell our readers about your professional background.

Leshner: I worked in corporate law for over 30 years. Right out of law school, I joined the law department of Unisys. For the next 27 years I was with Sony Corporation of America (which later became Sony Electronics), where I served as general counsel. Originally based in New York City, it moved in the early 1980s to Park Ridge, New Jersey. I retired three years ago, in July 2004.

Editor: When you were at Sony, did a law firm's pro bono participation weigh into your selection decision?

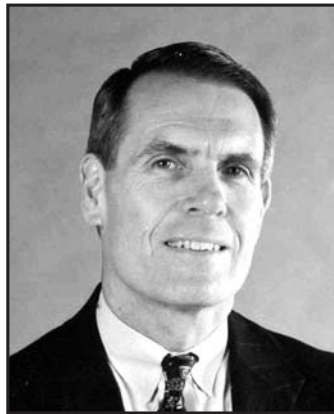
Leshner: Yes, absolutely. We were always impressed with law firms that had pro bono programs. We liked to see law firms giving back; we looked at how much they spent or did in the pro bono field. We liked to see that they gave pro bono hours, and that associates – who have barely enough time to breathe at some big firms – were involved as well. In addition, we looked for law firms with diversity programs within the firm, and preferred firms with relatively high ratios of women and other minorities at partnership as well as associate levels.

Editor: Can you tell us about the non-profit and/or pro bono work you have done in the past?

Leshner: I have tried to be involved with volunteering since my college days. I loved what I did and appreciated seeing the results in the community. I did work for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society and for United Way. I was on the board of The Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation for about ten years. I also began riding in the National Multiple Sclerosis Society Bike Ride for much of that time. I worked on the board for the Volunteer Center of Bergen County, a terrific organization which is now actually headed up by my wife, Barbara Leshner.

Editor: Was it through your participation in the bike ride that you became involved with the Multiple Sclerosis Society?

Leshner: Yes, it was. At that time, I had no direct personal link to the disease. About 14 years ago, one of my colleagues at Sony asked me to participate in the MS Bike Ride, which I thoroughly enjoyed. The next year we started Team Sony. Soon thereafter, a good friend and neighbor of ours – in her early 30s, with three small children – was diagnosed with MS. I began to understand more of the complexity of the disease and how much of an impact it could have on people in the prime of their lives. That gave me the incentive to keep riding, which I have done for 14



Frank M. Leshner

years now, along with my family. Through this, people from the Board got to know me, and after learning I was retiring from Sony and intending to go full-time into the nonprofit world, a board member contacted me. At the time, a new president of the North Jersey chapter was needed, so I went through the interview process with their board committee along with other candidates and was offered the position. I've been doing it two and a half years now.

Editor: What is the mission of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society?

Leshner: The mission of the Society is twofold: (1) to fund research to find the cause and cure for MS and (2) to offer assistance and education and programs for people currently with MS and their families. Fortunately, with the benefit of new pharmaceuticals in the past 10–15 years, the worst effects of MS can be ameliorated and put in remission for many, many years, but there's no cure yet, and people with MS and their families really need our support.

Editor: How have you seen the Society grow during your time there?

Leshner: The Society at the national level was about to change when I came into this chapter two and a half years ago. At that time Joyce Nelson had just become the CEO. She had been with the Society for close to 20 years, but when she took the CEO position, she came in with a very active mind and a good broom, and she really cleaned out a lot of old ways of thinking at the society. For example: one of the first things she did was to engage on a pro bono basis the services of Wieden & Kennedy, an Oregon-based ad agency, that came up with a whole new "look and feel" for the society, including the new trademark. Meanwhile, at the chapter level, when I joined, the Society had yet to apply concepts we're all familiar with in the business world – basically, those of marketing and sales. At the end of the day, any charity has to market itself and sell its message in order to attract volunteers and donors. I think we're doing a much better job of that, both at the national level and the local level here in North Jersey.

Editor: What expertise, whether in business or law, do you feel you bring to the table there?

Leshner: I can't say I have any marketing or sales expertise per se, as I was strictly the general counsel at Sony. Nonetheless, I understood what it took to get to the marketplace and make an impact with your product and your name. I think that what I've done at the chapter is to make everybody more mindful – from the receptionist through the social workers through, of course, the development people – that we have to market what it is the MS Society does in the fight against the disease and, critically important, to help the people who have MS and their families. Just communicating successfully what we do as an organization often leads to more donations and more people attracted to this cause.

And, I definitely have used my legal skills. I think every general counsel knows that they come into play in a variety of ways in everything we do in the business world. Fortunately we've had no serious legal issues to contend with at the society, but the practical experience of how to get a problem resolved and how to get a product to market without legal issues has come in very handy for me. The persuasion skills of a lawyer are as useful in the nonprofit sector as they are in the business world. For instance, you may have a difficult client in the company or at the law firm whom you need to educate first and convince that there's a better way to do something. Likewise, in the nonprofit world, often times you have to convince board members or the public that you have a better product here and that this is the way that we should get this message across. At the end of the day, you have to sell people on the idea of making a donation to your cause. On the other side, you have to sell people who perhaps have MS and are reluctant to come forward, perhaps because they don't understand what the society can do for them.

Editor: I hadn't thought about that aspect.

Leshner: People don't always know or need the services of a social-work organization. As one board member whom I recruited (the very woman who suffered from MS and motivated me to keep riding) said, "You know, I'm very lucky. I don't need the services of the MS Society. We're well enough off that I don't need social services, and I have great support at home. But our client is the poor woman whose husband's left her with three kids and no health insurance. That person needs your services, and we've got to get the word out to her."

Editor: Obviously the National Multiple Sclerosis Society has benefited a great deal from your participation, but how do you feel you have benefited by being there?

Leshner: I think that everybody who does volunteer work, legal or otherwise, benefits in a couple ways. First, obvi-

ously it makes you feel good to feel that you're giving back something. For the younger readers in your audience, I think that it's always beneficial to your career to be able to say you've done A, B, or C for the community. In addition, volunteering hones skill sets that you may not get a chance to practice in a business environment – whether it's working for a shelter; becoming a Big Brother or Sister; being a Mentoring Mom for an unwed teenager; sitting on the United Way board and listening to proposals and voting on how the United Way should spend its money. You can really grow in so many ways if you volunteer. I can't say how important it has been for my family and myself because it's been immeasurable.

Editor: It sounds like you planted the seeds for a fulfilling retirement early on.

Leshner: Yes, I did. It's important to get involved "early and often;" it's best not to wait until the last minute, when you're facing retirement. I like to ride my bike and hike, but I need more than that to fill my days. You need something, even if it's on a part-time basis. It's best if you can carry over from some of the volunteer jobs you've had during your work life. I've heard about people who believe they will "jump into something" upon retirement, but I don't think that works. You really need to understand and be interested in what it is that you're going to volunteer for. It may be something you've never done before, but I believe that you should put your toe in the water while you're still working, and develop the interest or area of give-back you want to be involved with, whether that be environmental advocacy, social work, medical services or anything.

Editor: Do you have any brass-tacks suggestions for our readers to find volunteering opportunities?

Leshner: An excellent way for people in metropolitan areas to get involved is to find a volunteer center in your county or area. Many counties in northern New Jersey have these. These centers will find a good "fit" for you with one of a plethora of volunteer opportunities they have available. That's a really good way to start. The pro bono legal programs are also terrific. At Sony, we had a list of who was active with pro bono and had their eyes opened to the social needs all around them. If these programs aren't available to you, do your research. Pick something that may be of interest to you, search for an organization that offers those services and try to get your foot in the door. Volunteers are always needed, so be persistent.

Editor: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Leshner: I'd just like to reiterate the importance of getting involved as soon as you can. You'll benefit today, and set yourself up for fulfilling years down the road.

Please email the interviewee at frank.lesher@nmss.org with questions about this interview.