

# Griffith Goes Global



By Aimee Robinette  
Photography by Courtney Dean

**C**leveland attorney Ben Griffith is an astute businessman. He has continuously transformed himself in order to remain relevant in his field.

This small town lawyer took each work experience and has parlayed it into a branch of international interest.

From 1983-2003, Griffith worked as board attorney for the Bolivar County Board of Supervisors. Among many of the tasks

serving the supervisors, one issue repeated itself every few years.

“As I got more and more involved in county redistricting litigation throughout the 1980s and litigation that focused on minority electoral access and participation in the political process, a number of county and municipal governmental clients outside of Mississippi hired me, and the work grew beyond what I could have imagined, Griffith says. “Apparently, some of that litigation was noticed by others, outside of Mississippi, and my first speaking engagement outside the

USA was a seminar presentation on voting rights litigation given at a continuing legal education meeting of the International Municipal Lawyers Association (IMLA) in Edmondton, Alberta.

“Beginning in the late 1990s, my work with the World Jurist Association led to my getting involved in a number of overseas conferences dealing with the democratic process, rule of law, protection of minority voting rights, government corruption, fundamental human rights, and continuity of governance issues faced by countries hit with



## Cleveland attorney teaches democracy overseas

terrorist attacks.”

Griffith notes the issues that were addressed at these and later conferences were literally ripped out of the headlines, issues that affected the Western nations and their ability to continue to provide guidance and reliable standards for the rest of the world in the broad field of human rights.

“I enjoyed working with attorneys and experts in the area of election law throughout this period of time, and during the past decade was asked to be part of legal education programs and conferences on the strug-

gles faced by Western democracies, anti-corruption measures, government ethics, security in the wake of terrorism, and related issues in Prague, Czech Republic; Beijing, Peoples Republic of China; Edinborough, Scotland; Guadalajara, Mexico; and Kiev, Ukraine,” he explains. “In addition to being invited to speak at conferences like these, I have written quite a bit in my field of practice, edited and helped write chapters in two books on voting rights and election law, a chapter on preserving the right to vote and the election process in the wake of natural disasters and man-

made disasters, a chapter on remedies that was included in a book in International Election Standards and Practices, and today I am starting on a third edition of *America Votes!*, which will be published in early 2016.”

Griffith, who is married to Kathy Griffith, said much of his Cleveland work and writing from the 1990s to the present was enhanced and encouraged by colleagues in the American Bar Association, the World Jurist Association, and IMLA.

“It led to my involvement in a continuing legal education program on how to continue and carry on essential governmental functions in the face of terrorism and random attacks by enemies of the state. This program took place in Jerusalem shortly before Benjamin Netanyahu announced that he was running for Prime Minister of Israel about six years ago. And it led to my being asked two years ago to come to the Republic of Georgia to observe pre-election problems that were threatening to corrupt that nation's electoral process and cause irreparable harm to its democratic government,” he says.

“This was followed by a program that I put together in 2012 with a team of highly qualified and experienced Georgian and American attorneys on Georgian Election Law at the Georgian American University School of Law in Tbilisi, Georgia. During this same time, colleagues in Ukraine asked the IMLA executive director and me to come to Kiev and Lviv in May 2013 to give a series of presentations on municipal governance, citizen access to and participation in open meetings, access of citizens to public records, public procurement, and related issues,” he continues.

Most recently, Griffith took part in a teleconference at the Ole Miss Law School that was Skyped to an audience of newly elected Ukrainian government officials, nongovernmental officers, law students and political activists at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, Ukraine.

“We are now planning to put on a webinar that focuses on best practices in public procurement and open access to government with our colleagues in Ukraine in November,” he says.

The exact issues Griffith tackles are protection of fundamental Human rights, fair elections, protection of Western democratic government institutions, open access to government, promotion of transparency in government, remedies for government corruption, providing examples and models to demonstrate fundamental principles of

democratic governance, and election contests based on recognized international principles.

Griffith also says he has learned much about the United States as he learned about the countries he visited.

"We are not that much different from our brothers and sisters in Eastern and Central Europe, but we have technological skills and experience that we can share with them to help them improve the quality of life and increase the level of respect for fundamental human rights to safety, security, and protection from arbitrary actions by governmental officials. We can show them that the freedoms we enjoy as Americans are the most valuable of all the human rights to fight for," he notes. "For me, fear of the unknown has been my greatest challenge. When I was in Ukraine in 2013, I could tell there was an undercurrent of unrest and discontent with the government then in control, and it manifested itself in the way people talked about limits that were being placed on their freedom to express their views and to speak out on matters of public concern, and it even involved some degree of political retaliation against those outside the government by officials who misused their governmental power.

"Months later the Ukrainian leadership

pushed away from ongoing efforts to align with the European Union, and the result was a revolution and massive upheaval, a protest that ignited in the Maidan Square in Kiev and led to the ouster of the pro-Russian leadership and the ushering in of a new pro-West Ukraine," he explains. "Similarly, when I was in the Republic of Georgia in 2012 on the eve of the Parliamentary elections, similar abuses of governmental power were complained of. I could feel a massive upheaval was underway in the political support for the incumbent, and a massive rejection of that country's governing body was indeed in the works, and the election results that October and the Presidential election in 2013 showed that peaceful overthrow of the government was taking place."

Griffith is quick to say that none of what he has accomplished is a personal triumph, but it is the product of many dedicated people working together to help improve the quality of life, increase the level of freedom, and expand the broad-based support for their local and national government that marginalized people experience, particularly in a post-communist country.

"Any role I played in it was that of a worker on the ground level," he says. Griffith

continues being a partner in his active law practice that he enjoys very much, and his law firm was recently recognized as one of the top firms in the state in its field of practice.

"You don't do that by sleeping at the wheel. My work takes me all over the State of Mississippi, and extends to civil litigation in most of the southern states. I reckon we have represented over 45 of the counties and as many municipalities and school districts throughout the state, and we pick up new governmental clients on a regular basis. I also enjoy working as board attorney for the 17-county Yazoo Mississippi Delta Joint Water Management District and focusing on efforts to help the Mississippi Delta achieve a sustainability in the amount and quality of groundwater and surface water resources for agricultural and industrial uses and most important, for public water supply," he says. "I consider myself fortunate in loving the work that I do, enjoying the day to day challenges that it brings, and essentially bringing together my avocation, my vocation and my life's work into one combined effort that I find to be fulfilling, challenging and full of surprises." **DBJ**

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