

Alumni Corner: Richard Freeman (2015-2018; New York)

By: Hyatt Mustefa



Richard Freeman works at the World Health Organization (WHO) Headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. He is a 2015 graduate of Stanford Law School, and was a Cleary associate in the New York office from 2015 to 2018. Prior to law school, he worked with non-profit and private sector organizations in global health and international development. (All views expressed here are his own and do not represent the views of WHO).

What made you choose Cleary?

I wanted to work at Cleary because of the culture and the people. I had a good friend who worked at the firm and he introduced me to other Cleary attorneys. I discovered a cosmopolitan, intellectual and collegial community where I was drawn to colleagues who saw their professional work as part of a larger world view. They were working on matters that were tied to

major international events. They cared about art and culture. We could talk about specific legal problems but also about what was happening in global affairs. I also care a lot about public service and Cleary has a really meaningful commitment to pro bono work – that spoke volumes about the firm’s values. I was excited to join that kind of community.

What is your current position?

I work at the World Health Organization (“WHO”) in the Office of the Director General, and specifically with the Special Advisor for Strategic Priorities. We work on programs that are elevated by the WHO leadership because of their unique importance for the institution. This year, though, I’ve spent most of my time working on the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic. WHO plays a central role in coordinating the global response.

What other priorities and programs do you work on?

Aside from the pandemic, I’ve worked on a wide range of topics, such as universal health coverage, HIV, nutrition and human rights. One area in particular where I’ve invested a lot of energy is related to cancer. In 2018, Dr. Tedros, the Director-General, issued a “Call to Action” to eliminate cervical cancer. It’s the one type of cancer that we actually have the tools to eliminate – it’s both preventable and curable. The disproportionate burden of mortality in developing countries and among women in minority communities in developed countries is really a reflection of a social justice problem and a human rights problem. We mobilized a movement of governments, advocates and non-governmental organizations to take action. Last month, we finally achieved the passage of a historic resolution by the World Health Assembly – the governing body of WHO – where 194 countries formally

called for the elimination of cervical cancer and adopted a global strategy to make it happen. The strategy sets out goals and targets to improve coverage of HPV vaccination, screening and treatment services in all countries over the next ten years, so that we can set the world on a path to eliminate a cancer. In the time leading up to the resolution, before the pandemic, I travelled to meet with WHO's regional and country offices, governments, non-profits and other stakeholders as we developed the strategy and built up the campaign. COVID-19 is an urgent focus for all of us, but we also can't allow routine health services to collapse, or else we risk losing even more lives to other diseases. It's amazing that so many countries made this commitment in the context of the pandemic.

How did your time at Cleary influence or help you develop the types of skill sets that you've used in your current role?

At Cleary, I worked in the firm's sovereign practice, mainly as a litigator. Before going to law school, I worked in global health and international development; I've been working with public institutions my whole career. But having the opportunity to serve as legal counsel to a country, especially in sovereign finance matters, gave me a new perspective into an important facet of how governments function and the issues they face. It taught me important lessons about how finance and politics interact with legal issues.

Cleary also taught me ways of analyzing hard problems and how to make arguments. In our cases, we had to think about what to say to the court, but we also had to be aware of how our work might be picked up by the media and how our positions could affect the government outside the courtroom too. Litigating also helped me to become more comfortable with a dispute. My current job requires a lot of diplomacy, but sometimes you need to know how to be direct and firmly engage in a conflict. Even though I now use that skillset to advance a different kind of goal, a lot of my job still starts with trying to understand a complicated set of facts and advocating for an outcome. Sometimes I even still think to myself, how would Carmine Boccuzzi or Jon Blackman draft this?

What do you miss most about Cleary?

The people. I miss Norma. I miss the Argentina team, which was like my Cleary family. I miss the pro bono teams that I was part of, our neighborhood on the 45th floor, the Cleary Stanford alumni and other friends.

On a professional level, I miss being somewhere that is optimized to support us to focus on cerebral output. Cleary is a high-octane, intellectual place that maximizes the time you spend applying your mind and developing legal skills. I miss that. The UN isn't like that.

Bringing things into the present, how has your job changed since the onset of COVID-19?

I became involved in the emergency response in February, when the global supply chains for PPE, testing supplies and biomedical equipment began to collapse. Soon after that, Europe was the new epicenter of the pandemic. The outbreak eventually reached the inside of the WHO buildings. Our colleagues started getting sick and the building was shut down. Geneva also closed down. A few of us were designated as part of the critical team that continued coming in. We ventured out into empty streets amidst the ambulance sirens, and we hunkered down inside the shuttered headquarters. It felt post-apocalyptic. As the world was stocking out of crucial supplies, we had to strategize and coordinate with other international actors to ensure that some minimum quantity of essential materials was getting to the healthcare workers who needed them around the world. We even worked with ethicists on equitable principles for distributing scarce supplies. More recently, we've been trying to facilitate the introduction of new products and shift gears as evidence becomes available about new types of tests and treatments.

COVID-19 has also affected my professional identity as an American. At a time when the world may doubt our commitment to international cooperation, I feel it's so important for those of us working in the international arena to show that we're still here, that as a society, Americans are still committed to playing constructive, collaborative roles in the global community.

Having confronted such a daunting challenge of global scale, do you see hope moving forward?

I really believe in multilateralism and now more than ever, we need international cooperation. I think the pandemic is demonstrating to the world that, whether we like it or not, there are some problems of such massive scale that we need to work together to solve them. This era of nationalism has put us all in jeopardy. We need to build stronger institutions and public services that can withstand pressure in the moments we need them most. We need strong health care systems in all countries that are accessible and that deliver quality care for all people. Not only is it the right thing to do, but one person's disease can become everyone's health emergency overnight. And there are other existential challenges that also require international cooperation, like climate change. I hope our collective consciousness can evolve from this experience, as we all start to recognize our interconnectedness enough to finally embrace a spirit of solidarity; we need that to confront the global challenges that still lie ahead.

What would you say to a Cleary attorney looking to chart a path similar to yours?

That's a hard one because I could not have predicted where my career was heading. A law school professor gave me good advice that I often think about. He said not to worry too much about exactly where you think your career needs to be going. Just keep aiming to be in proximity to good things that interest you and that you care about, and from there you'll gain the vantage point you need to figure out where to go next.