

## BILL NEUKOM: BATTING 1,000

By Randee Fenner (BA '75)

Sometimes the most

INTERESTING CAREERS ARE THOSE WITHOUT A ROAD MAP. WILLIAM H. "BILL" NEUKOM '67, whether through serendipity, extraordinary prescience, or both, is living what many JDs—and baseball fans—can only dream of. After rising to the head of the legal department of a software icon, he was elected to represent his profession as president of the American Bar Association. If that weren't enough, he will now assume the role of general managing partner of the San Francisco Giants. And he's not done yet.

Like many successful lawyers, Neukom had no particular interest in the law when he was a teenager growing up in San Mateo, Calif., until he was elected chief justice of the first Student Court at his high school. But the experience wasn't enough for him to change course. He kept to his plan to study philosophy and headed east to Dartmouth College.

By senior year he found he had no great passion for pursuing a PhD, but he had developed an "abiding instinct for fair play." He notes, "I wanted to paint on a bigger canvas, and I thought it was a high calling to solve people's legal problems." After doing "surprisingly well" on the LSAT, he returned to the Bay Area and entered Stanford Law School in 1964.

"It was an amazing atmosphere, being surrounded by very smart people and 'scary-smart' professors," says Neukom, who notes that he developed a great appreciation for the law while at SLS.

"Bill always exhibited a keen intellectual curiosity. He was an excellent law student who even then always cared about the greater good and what the law should be, not necessarily what it was," says Charles G. "Chuck" Armstrong '67, president of the Seattle Mariners Baseball Club. "Moreover, he was the center on our intramural basketball team that went to the championship game before losing."

Yet, despite the remarkable environment at Stanford, Neukom says that he didn't get out of it all of what he should have. "I took it too seriously—I just ground through it, lost in the 'trees' and missing the 'forest.'"

As a result, he was unsure of what he wanted to do when he graduated. "San Francisco firms were hiring students with better records," he recalls. He decided to try Seattle when he saw a job notice on the law school bulletin board for a "law clerk/bailiff" in the King County Superior Court.

In Seattle, he found himself literally working as a bailiff: "This was not a

prestigious position. I filled water pitchers and babysat juries."

But he also spent time briefing his judge, Hon. Theodore S. Turner, whom he recalls fondly as "a Renaissance man who loved the law." Turner presided over both motions and trials, and Neukom was exposed to a variety of advocacy under the tutelage of someone he now regards as one of his first mentors.

From there, Neukom joined a small law firm but after eight or nine years decided he wanted more range in his practice. He knew William Gates Sr. and, bringing some clients with him, Neukom joined the firm of Shidler McBroom Gates & Lucas (later Preston Gates & Ellis) in 1978.

Neukom was still in a temporary office when Gates Sr. asked him to advise his son's software startup. Neukom says he has "never known why Bill Gates Sr. would approach a new lateral hire with absolutely no technical background to take on that task."

It is tempting to say that the rest is history. Neukom left the firm and became Microsoft's first general counsel, heading the legal department from 1985 until 2002. During that time, Microsoft began its historic rise as a global software giant, while Neukom's team was at the center of the developing legal field of intellectual property.

Neukom, operating in the eye of the hurricane, initially didn't have a real awareness of the massive effect Microsoft was having on the computing world. "I thought I was just part of a first-generation company that was on a mission to create useful technology," says Neukom. But he steered the company through Microsoft's legal growing pains, including the 1998 federal government antitrust action, against which Neukom defended the company.

Neukom rejoined the Gates firm—now K&L Gates—in 2002 and soon became the chair of the firm, which gave him an opportunity to pursue his long-



**“I WANTED TO PAINT ON A BIGGER CANVAS,  
AND I THOUGHT IT WAS A HIGH CALLING TO SOLVE  
PEOPLE’S LEGAL PROBLEMS.”** Bill Neukom '67

time interest in community and professional affairs.

Always an active participant in the ABA, Neukom served as a state delegate and eventually ran for and was elected ABA president. His term expired in August 2008, but not before he had launched World Justice Project, which is dedicated to bringing the rule of law to developing nations. Neukom explains that every ABA president has a pet project but he wanted something that would stand alone and continue after his presidency. He sought and received funding from numerous outside sponsors, including a \$1.75 million launching grant from the Gates Foundation.

Many in his position might be content at that point to rest on their laurels. But Neukom is about to undertake what some would consider another dream

job—general managing partner of the San Francisco Giants.

According to Neukom, a die-hard Giants fan whose love affair with the team began when it moved to San Francisco in the late 1950s, this was “not in the master plan.” But working for Microsoft—and accumulating valuable stock options—allowed him to invest in the owners’ group that was formed in 1992 to keep the Giants in San Francisco. Over time, Neukom was able to increase the size of his investment—and thereby increase his role in the team’s operations. Now he will take on the job of CEO, a full-time position that will require him to be in San Francisco as many as six or seven days a week, although Seattle will remain his home.

“Operating a major league baseball

team is akin to managing a public trust,” says Armstrong. “One is the designated caretaker for all the fans and the community in which the team plays. And every day you are held accountable. It is an amazing experience and difficult to explain to others.”

“If anyone can bring the San Francisco Giants back to the top, it’s Bill,” says Larry Kramer, Richard E. Lang Professor of Law and Dean. “He’s a brilliant, effective, and inspiring leader, whether at the helm of a software giant, the ABA—or a baseball team.”

One of his goals for the organization is to define “the Giants’ way” of playing baseball—whatever that may be. Giants fans certainly hope that means that Neukom will continue his winning streak in his most recent endeavor. **SL**