

A matter of degrees

Q&A with Jim Wadsworth

By **MATT CHANDLER**
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Hodgson Russ LLP partner and Oishei Foundation Chairman Jim Wadsworth.

Saturday, Hodgson Russ partner Jim Wadsworth took the stage at Canisius College to accept an honorary degree in recognition of his contributions to Western New York.

Wadsworth, who chairs the John R. Oishei Foundation, the largest foundation in the Buffalo area, sat down with the Buffalo Law Journal a few days earlier to discuss his Canisius honor and the importance of giving back to the city he grew up in.

BLJ: The list of charitable foundations and organizations you belong to is an impressive one.

JW: If you live this long (laughing), you've got to be involved in a lot of things.

BLJ: Talk a little bit about what it means to be recognized for all you do in this community.

JW: I'm humbled by it. I think of honorary degrees as (reserved for) someone with great intellectual accomplishments or some major public accomplishments, and so I feel very humbled and honored.

I think Canisius is a wonderful institution. I was on their board at one point, and I think this is probably a longevity award more than anything. I've been around long enough to have been involved in many activities, and they are very nice to recognize that.

BLJ: There are people who have been around a long time who choose not to be so active in the community. What's driven you to be as involved as you've been?

JW: I will say, my mother was very involved in the community and very interested in the community, and I would certainly say this firm has been a very important factor in that.

They have been dedicated to community service, and the people who trained me were people who encouraged me to be involved and gave me the opportunity to be involved. The said "Go ahead and do it" even if it meant you might miss out on a few billable hours.

BLJ: You've been involved in many organizations. Is there one interest or passion that you lean toward in your charitable endeavors?

JW: The subject matter I'm most interested in is the arts. I love the (Buffalo) Philharmonic and I love the theater. My wife is now chairman of the Irish Classical Theatre, and I love that. I was on the Albright-Knox (Art Gallery) board for three different terms.

But as for the most satisfying thing, I'd say it was when I was on the NFTA (Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority) board and I was chairman of the Aviation Committee, and we built the new terminal at the (Buffalo-Niagara Falls International) Airport. I was involved in picking the architect for that and then being very involved in the design and construction of that terminal, and I will say, I think it is something that this community can be very proud of.

BLJ: Along those lines, do you have a favorite foundation or charity that you have been part of?

JW: What I'm doing now as chairman of the Oishei Foundation, it's different in that most organizations I've been involved in, you have to raise money.

Here, it's a wonderful opportunity to give money away and support the various projects in the community. We are able to leverage our dollars with other dollars. It's really very satisfying, and I feel very lucky to be doing that.

The foundation gives away an average of \$15 million annually.

BLJ: Do you ever just sit back and marvel at the fact that you're part of giving away that kind of money and impacting so many people with what you do?

JW: That's a good phrase, to "marvel at" it. As I say, I feel very lucky to have the opportunity, and I feel it comes with a very large responsibility to do it right.

It's one thing to just write a check; I think that what we do is encourage organizations to think through what they are asking for, to collaborate with other organizations and to maximize the value of what we do give them. I feel very strongly that supporting the best of our community organizations is something we should do, to help them when they want to get better.

BLJ: Given your high profile in the community, I suspect you get a lot of requests to be on boards and work with these organizations. How do you balance your desire to give back with having time for the rest of your life?

JW: I will say that, at times, I've overcommitted, but I've learned over the years, in order to do a job right, you have to have the time to be involved. Just putting my name on a board isn't something I like to do. I feel that if I'm going to be involved, I should take an active role, and there is just so much time.

My wife tells me very often that I have to learn a word I've never learned: No.

But a lot of it, I enjoy what I'm doing, so if it is an evening meeting, I'd rather do that than just sit around watching television.

BLJ: When we spoke back in November, we talked about lawyers continuing to practice well past when many others are retiring, so I'll ask you the same thing for your charitable work: Do you see yourself slowing down, or is this just something you love to do, and you plan to carry on with your community service?

JW: I love it. I'll probably slow down as I get older, I probably won't do quite as much, but I see being involved in the community as something I'll always have.

I see my last involvement probably being at Forest Lawn (Cemetery) — not as a board member, but as a resident (laughing).

JAMES WADSWORTH

· Title: partner, Hodgson Russ LLP

· Age: 69

· Career highlights: Practicing since 1965. Managing partner at Hodgson Russ, 1988–98; firm chairman, 1998–2001

· Areas of practice: Estate planning, trusts, taxation

· Current boards/affiliations: chairman, John R. Oishei Foundation; trustee, Forest Lawn Cemetery; trustee, Shaw Festival Foundation; director, Frank Lloyd Wright Rowing Boathouse Corp; trustee, Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation; trustee, Mulroy Family Foundation; trustee, the Carlos and Elizabeth Heath Foundation; member, advisory board, Waste Technology Services.