Since Peter Kalis took the helm of K&L Gates LLP in 1997, the firm has grown from 400 lawyers in six offices in the eastern U.S. to more than 2,000 in 48 offices on five continents. It’s passed the $1 billion revenue mark, carries zero debt and currently ranks as Pittsburgh’s seventh-largest private company. The kid from Wheeling, W.Va., who once kicked around the idea of attending McDonald’s Hamburger University before becoming a Rhodes Scholar, is entering his 34th year at the firm.

Your background is in restaurants. Did you ever consider that as a career? My mom and dad ran a diner in Wheeling, W.Va. As boys, my brother and I spent considerable time there trying to help out but mainly got in the way of our parents. Although the sailing wasn’t always smooth, mom and dad maintained their little business until my father became disabled and passed away in the 1960s. In high school, I was indeed a night manager at a McDonald’s. I even flirted briefly with the idea of applying to McDonald’s Hamburger University, but decided instead to follow my brother to West Virginia University. Our parents were passionate about our education. My brother ended up a doctor, and I ended up a lawyer. Every day, though, I still think it’s all about hustling to serve customers and about keeping the counters clean. Old habits die hard. It was good training for the business of law.

Of all the cities in the K&L Gates universe, do you have a favorite? It’s not diplomacy that restrains me but rather a sense of humility. We have 48 offices – 26 in the U.S., four in Australia, seven in Asia, two in the Middle East, eight in Europe and one in South America. All of these cities are special places – authentic and proud, brimming with unique histories and boundless futures, full of good hard-working people, all with tales of joy and woe, battles won and lost, and friends lost and gained. How could I choose? I’m just lucky to be a part of it all.

Are there still regions where the firm wants a physical presence? As emerging markets cool and the economic reality of the next decade or two comes into sharper relief, including an energy independent North America, it becomes increasingly clear that our firm should have national coverage in Canada with offices in Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, Vancouver and perhaps other cities. With powerful resources and energy sectors, strong banks, a recent stock exchange in Toronto and hundreds of highly skilled lawyers, Canada is a natural for us. The pending economic reforms in Mexico, which, among other things, will open up the energy sector to foreign investment, make that country a strong candidate for expansion as well.

What’s your best tip for the frequent international traveler? Ignore the advice about not drinking alcoholic beverages when airborne.

This Jan. 1 is probably the first in years where K&L Gates isn’t officially marking the completion of a merger or acquisition. How will you celebrate? Our New Year’s Eve ritual will disappoint you, and this year will be no different. That evening, I always send a global email to our partners on how we concluded our financial year. Once I click on send, I enjoy a moment or two in quiet contemplation of the year that passed and the one about to emerge. And then Mary and I go out to dinner. She drives, as I’m likely still feeling the effects of my moment or two of quiet contemplation.

Your wife Mary is also a K&L Gates partner, so do you two have
any strategies to share with oth-
er dual-career couples? In one se-
scenarios, we have no problem leav-
ing the office at the office. Life's too
short to talk about all of that stuff at
home. On the other hand, the
days are rare when both of
e don't spend work time on our
home computers, sometimes at
odd hours. We've got a small
service business, and the sun never
sets on our household.

What do you like best about
what you do? American lawyers
tell with language and ideas while
advising on behalf of
clients in the world's oldest
constitutional democracy. We are at
once guardians and instruments of
the Rule of Law. Think of us as
somewhat like academics, except
that we get paid more and drink
something other than tea with our
colleagues. What's not to like about
that?

And least? What I like least is
the incessant criticism of "Big Law"
coming from certain consultants,
ademics and legal journalists
who have no problem jealous
market interactions will be their
first. At the end of the day, however,
they can be reduced to the distant
buzz of gnats in an elephant's ear.
If you stay close to your clients and
your partners, the noise and
distractions recede into the distance.

Greg Jordan recently left Reed
Smith to become PNC's gen-
eral counsel. Is there anything you
haven't done career-wise that you
want to accomplish? We're all
proud of Greg, but I've made differ-
ent decisions. We've got to do the
opportunities have come my way,
as they inevitably do when you've
been in the saddle as long as I have.
My job here isn't done and won't
be done until my partners or I
declare that it's done. What will I
do then? Early in my adult life, I
was a graduate student, so leisure
time doesn't scare me. Until they
change the locks on me, however,
I likely will remain at K&L.

How and why did you decide
on a career in law? I admired an
uncle who became a local judge in
Ohio. But it was the times as well.
Vietnam. The civil rights move-
ment. The environmental awaken-
ing. Jock Vablonski and the
Min-
ers for Democracy. Waterloo.
The nation was awash in big ideas
and bigger challenges. Most had a sig-
nificant legal dimension. I wanted
to be part of that conversation. As
time has passed, I've come to learn
that lawyers are missionaries for
the Rule of Law and that law is a
higher calling. We are critical to
a world where the highest ideals
and free peoples. Law and law-
yers are more relevant than ever,
especially as we live in a century
in which many globally significant
economies have no tradition com-
parable to the Rule of Law

You were a summer associate at
Jones Day. Why did you choose
to join then-Kirkpatrick & Lock-
hart? I was indeed a summer associa-
tee at Jones Day in Cleveland in the
summer of 1977. It was a great
firm to work in then; it's even
better now. And I even liked Cleveland. But,
frankly, K&L had me at the hello.
The founders – Kirkpatrick, Pome-
roy, Lockhart, Johnson, Hutchison,
Frazer and Miller – were still walk-
ing the halls, and the indomitable
Chuck Queenan was running the firm.
Under K&L, the Grapes winemaking
lectual power and ferocity of spirit
coupled with empathy for friends
and foes alike. He was, and indeed
is, the compleat lawyer. I made
a quick calculation that if I
could just hang around that guy,
I'd be a better human being
and lawyer as a result.

What's the biggest difference
at the firm from when you joined
in 1980 and for the associates of 2013?
Let me first say what's the same.
An associate in a law firm during
the most anxiety-producing stag-
es of any employment track.
Enormously bright people, who in oth-
er vocations would be well on their
ways to professional advancement,
arrive at law firms with accom-
plished histories but without the
legal judgment to add material
value at the point of client engage-
ments. As building blocks for
their careers and to serve clients, they
are assigned more basic though
necessary tasks until, through a
magically accretive process, they
are able to operate in sophistica-
ed areas of law without supervi-
sion and to speak on behalf of the
firm and its clients. That has not
changed. The biggest difference,
I think, is all positive. Because of
the forces of globalization, regula-
tion and innovation in the world
of law today, there is a pandemic
of legal complexity. Associates can
follow disparate paths into the legal
marketplace – regional, national,
international – in a wide variety of
specialties.

Did you have a mentor at K&L?
Obviously Chuck Queenan was
a class by himself, though I was a litiga-
tor and he was a corporate law-
yer. Dave Brownlee taught me that,
with governance issues as well as
complex legal questions, the first
answer is rarely the best. Some of
my early litigation opportunities
were with Chuck, who continues
to be a mentor. I've worked with
Katarinic, who left the firm 20 or so
years ago. I learned much about
how to litigate from my contemporaries
Tom Birsic, Neal Brendel and Jerry McDevitt. My junior co-
authors, Tom Reiter and Jim Seg-
gal, have been an inspiration in
everything but age. If you stretch to
the year before my arrival at K&L,
Justice Byron R. White of the U.S.
Supreme Court was a spectacular
mentor. Among other things, Jus-
tice White taught me that law is a
contact sport.

K&L Gates has zero debt. How
do you manage this? We would
rather not buy something if we can't
afford it. Our partners finance our
firm, its operations and its growth
without the need for debt. High-
ly leveraged firms, as the contem-
porary theorist Nicholas Nassim Taleb has written, have to be bril-
liant at predicting both future rev-
ue and volatility, especially vola-
tility arising from so-called "Black
Swan" events, which themselves
are from the future. Those models
have little room for error. Firms financed
through equity have more room for
error. Because I am highly imper-
fect at what I do, I appreciate the
greater room for error.

K&L Gates' first overseas office
was in London. You're a Rhodes
Scholar and studied there. Was
there a special satisfaction in estab-
lishing an office there? Returning
to England was, and continues
to be, a very emotional event
in my life. I arrived in Oxford as a
scholar and stayed for 3 years.
It is one of the most beautiful
places in the world and experienced
Oxford is a magical place, a place
that once embraces big ideas,
subtle distinctions and precise
language. In my first week or two
there, I attended the memorial ser-
vice for W.H. Auden. The eulogist
was Sir Isaiah Berlin. The greatest
poet of the 20th century was eulog-
ized by the greatest scholar of the
20th century. That pretty much
sums it up. I attended seminars of
H.I.A. Hart on Legal Positivism,
J.D. Carr on freedom of speech
and law in mediating the ubiquitous
tension between consumption and
investment, Dame Helen Gardner
on T.S. Eliot, among others. You
can see that this would have made an
impression on a kid from Wheeling,
and anyone else for that matter.
I learned a lot about to me in
greatful for what our British fore-
bears have created for us in liter-
ature, language, the common law
and, perhaps most important,
the Rule of Law. And I marvel
every day at the difference between
the gloom of pre-Thatcher England
and the vibrant global capital that
we live and work in today. As Prime
Minister David Cameron said upon
Baroness Thatcher's death, she not
only served her country – she saved
it.

You've taken the firm around
the world via acquisitions, merg-
ers and starting offices from
scratch. Which is the least-compli-
cated way to enter a new market?
We've had a bias in favor of
mergers when entering new mark-
ets. But we've also started many
greenfield offices. When mergers
haven't been feasible or desir-
able, and those have also worked
out well. In fact, of our 48 venues,
about half were started as green
field sites. The real issue, however,
is the quality, character and loyalty
of the people, however you come
by them. We've been very for-
tunate in this respect.

You have Russian wooden doll
figures of Pittsburgh Penguins in
your office. What's the story
behind that? After the Pens' last
Stanley Cup victory, my wife, from
Boston visited our Moscow office
and purchased from a street ven-
dor a set of figures of five Pen-
guins stars of sharply descending
heights. As a local hero, Evgeni
Malkin is the tallest figure by far
followed by Marc-Andre Fleury and
defensive stars like Crosby, Gonchar, Gaetani and a very,
very tiny Jordan Staal. Rus-
ian humor.

The K&L Gates Pittsburgh office
is awash in white, and there's
almost a stairway to heaven ams-
pheric, there's a reception area
next to the level where your
office is located. What role did you
play in the design? No one coming
to my office has heaven in mind as
the destination. We care about our
architectural brand because it rein-
forces our more general firm brand.
We work hard to associate our firm
with values such as transparen-
cy and innovation. We concluded
long ago that a luminescient, mini-
malist office design reinforces our
brand promise of innovation and
transparency.

K&L Gates has taken extra steps
to create a healthier workplace;
your Pittsburgh office includes
areas for bicycle parking; you've
had fitness initiatives that brought
yoga and belly dancing classes
into the workplace. What do you do
to keep fit? Unless early flight times
preclude it, I work out daily. I sus-
pect that there are few people in
the world who work out as much as
I do with as little visible effect.
– Patty Fascarella