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Designing a dream life

Attorney Dan Ricketts ('92) puts his legal training to use in an unexpected way

By Kim Medaris Delker

Dan Ricketts doesn't like to get bored. If he spends too much time doing the same thing, you can count on him making a big change.

"I apparently get bored very easily," says Ricketts. "I think doing something new is the most important thing for me."

In 2002, Ricketts founded the West Hollywood-based DJR Design Group, a firm that designs commercial and residential building projects. But by looking at his résumé fifteen years ago, you'd never guess that's what he'd be doing today.

Take his academic career. He earned his undergraduate degree in business at UT in 1985.

"Those were the Reagan years, and everyone was very interested in business, so I was influenced by that, I think," Ricketts says.

After working as a banker for four years, specializing in lending for for-profit health care institutions, he started to get restless. He first considered divinity school but then chose to go to law school—perhaps influenced a bit by the times, with *L.A. Law* a hit show during that time, making law seem like a glamorous and exciting life. He earned his law degree at UT in 1992.

"When I chose law school, I had visions of working at the ACLU and arguing First Amendment cases before the Supreme Court," he says.

A bit disappointed with his job search but not ready to give up on a law career, Ricketts got a call from a friend in Los Angeles, who connected him with a job as in-house counsel for a computer company.

"I jumped at the chance," Ricketts says.

The Tullahoma, Tennessee, native packed his bags for the West Coast in 1992 and hasn't looked back. He worked steadily as an attorney in the computer and dot-com industry for several years, including serving as senior vice president of administration, senior legal counsel, and director of legal and business for Wareforce.com Inc. Dot-coms were hot, the economy was booming, and life was good for those like Ricketts.

Then, as quickly as it inflated, the dot-com bubble burst. It forced Ricketts into a new direction, one wildly different from law and business.

"I just happened to purchase a house around that time, and I decided to flip it to try to make a profit," he says.

It just so happened that his flipped house was included in an HGTV show, and from there, he began getting attention in a whole new field: interior design.

SPANNING THE GLOBE

Ricketts points out that he is not a formally trained designer, but he does have a knack for knowing what looks good, as well as an interest in interior design. He even briefly considered a career in the arts at one time. However, it was his initial success in house flipping that launched Ricketts into his current career. Before long, he began attracting clients, which led to the formation of DJR Design Group.

The design group began with relatively small interior design projects, such as kitchen and bath remodeling, but slowly transitioned into larger design projects.

"I met an Indonesian businessman who asked me to do a design on his new house, and from there, we kept getting more projects like that," Ricketts says.

Now the firm is almost exclusively focused on large-scale design projects, such as luxury homes with futuristic, spacious designs and unique features. His clients span the globe, from Hollywood superstars to wealthy businessmen on other continents. The group's projects can be found in Los Angeles, New York City, Nashville, Toronto, Montreal, Bali, and Jakarta.

Aside from breathtaking homes, some of the major projects of the firm currently include several Jakarta, Indonesia, projects, including a nightclub that opened in March and an office building.

THE RAINMAKER

Future projects will have Ricketts's group designing the lobby of the headquarters of the parent company of Ferarri Indonesia, as well as the executive floors of the

future office building of the car-maker.

Ricketts defines his role in the business now as "the rainmaker." He says he usually makes the first client contact, and then shifts the project over to the designers, who serve as the project managers.

"We're getting a lot of referrals from our clients as well as other designers," he says. "I'd like to eventually be more of a manager and let my staff do the bulk of the work on projects."

So how does Ricketts know after meeting with a client that the project is a go? Call it intuition.

"I need to walk into the room and I need to see it, visualize it," he says. "If I don't click with the client, I don't accept the job."

He says the firm has about eight to ten active projects at any one time, with two or three being large projects.

Future plans for DJR Design Group include defining and expanding their role in new technologies, such as social media, as well as getting involved in real estate investment.

"It's a very profitable way to go to make money for the business," he says.

NOT FAR FROM LAW

Ricketts says that his legal training may not directly apply to what he is doing now, but it has helped with routine business-owning tasks like reading contracts and evaluating and analyzing clients and business conditions.

But he points out that sometimes things are actually more difficult with a law degree.

For one, he says that being an attorney intimidates some clients. Also, he says his legal background and skill in argument can make him a challenging boss and co-worker.

"We're taught to be right all the time, and sometimes I go for the jugular on things that don't amount to a hill of beans," he says.

He doesn't actively practice law anymore, but he does keep his legal license current, "because you never know."

Does he miss the corporate life, wearing a suit, poring over legal documents for hours a day? In a word, no.

"I miss the things I haven't done, not the things I've done."

Ricketts says new things inspire him, and although his record thus far has been to change careers about every decade, he has no plans to do so at the moment. That doesn't mean he's done learning and exploring.

"I never want to regret not doing something."



Dan Ricketts

Photo by Adam Henderson