

# Raising the BAR

One Man's Global Pursuit of Justice

by WHITNEY WEEKS

Born in Uganda, raised in both Uganda and Kenya, and educated in the United States and the United Kingdom, Phillip Aliker has a unique perspective on and experience with culture, place and obligation. His connection to Uganda and to East Africa runs deep. And his ability and determination to make a significant difference in the lives of people living a continent away is due, in part, he says, to time spent at Vanderbilt University.

Aliker lived in Uganda with his family until the age of nine, when, in 1971, political and civil unrest forced his family to move first to Kenya and then, after his graduation from Vanderbilt, to England. An influential man by station and by political involvement, his father had his life threatened more than once, and the lives of both family friends and relatives were lost to politically motivated murders over the subsequent two decades.

"It was an extraordinarily traumatic time as a young person, and it had a profound effect on my outlook on life," Aliker says. "It made me want to succeed. And in order to do so, I had to learn to inculcate new values and new rules and survive on my own merit."

Today, Aliker and his family live in England. He is a barrister at law, and his wife, Susannah Thorpe Aliker, is the managing director at Credit Suisse for new business for Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Together they have four daughters—Camille,

Juliette, Lucy, and Eloise—ranging in age from fourteen years to eighteen-month-old twins. By all accounts personally and professionally successful, Aliker continues to work doggedly on behalf of the citizens of East Africa through both legal and human rights work. His commitment to East Africa informs his work and civic involvements now, just as it influenced his academic and professional choices years ago.

Intent on becoming a lawyer since the age of six, he studied political science at Vanderbilt. International study was a familiar venture in the Aliker family, as Phillip's father had earned his own undergraduate degree and a degree in dentistry from Northwestern University while a Fulbright Scholar. Phillip's mother, an African-American whom his father met and fell in love with while at Northwestern, also made certain her son was familiar with colleges and universities in the United States when the time came for post-secondary study.

After earning his undergraduate degree from Vanderbilt, he briefly considered staying to pursue a graduate degree. He ultimately decided to return to England to earn his J.D. from the University of Leeds so that he would be best prepared to practice law in either Uganda or Kenya, both of whose legal systems are largely based on British law.

"I always believed I was going back to East Africa," Aliker says. "My intention was to go back to Uganda after graduating,

but the country was still pretty unsettled and so that wasn't a realistic option in terms of a legal career. Kenya was [a realistic option] because my parents were there, but the country wouldn't admit me to practice because I wasn't a Kenyan citizen."

With plans for legal work in East Africa stymied on two fronts, he began practicing law within the United Kingdom. With each passing year, the possibility of relocating to either Uganda or Kenya seemed increasingly remote. Finally, he committed to a successful practice in London and turned his attentions to making contributions to East Africa in other ways.

"That decision was one I took with a great deal of difficulty and remorse. I wanted to go back to my own society and make a contribution," he says of that time. "I think everybody has aspirations for themselves that would be actualizing. Making a contribution through the law, helping a developing, emerging society is something I wanted to achieve."

Today Aliker makes his contributions in other ways, in part because of a shrinking global community. With the world becoming, as he puts it, "a frighteningly smaller place," the interaction between people in different countries and the level of international mobility, allows him to become intimately and actively involved in the areas of legal work, commercial justice, human rights, and judicial capacity building in East Africa.

In addition to the experiences of his childhood that shaped his

## Personal Expressions

By PHILLIP ALIKER

Some years ago I appeared before this very stuffy old judge—in the way that only a bewigged English judge could be—on an application of some kind. Whilst making my oral argument, I used the phrase "there are two alternatives." At this point the judge fixed me with a rather disdainful gaze—in the way that only an English Oxford-educated Judge might—and His Lordship retorted, "There could not be two alternatives."

I had appreciated the mistake as I finished the sentence, so I immediately shot back, "I am sorry, my Lord, for the redundant use of the word 'two'." The Judge shot back with the words "Not 'two' but 'alternative'." However, His Lordship, quickly appreciating that either word was superfluous in the context in which I had used it, the look of disdain rapidly metamorphosed into a look of awkward satisfaction.

At that point I had every reason to believe that I had won. To conceal His Lordship's embarrassment, the Judge declared, to the packed court and to the immense satisfaction of my client who was grinning from ear to ear, "Mr. Aliker, you are lucky that you are well educated."

As I sat down in the ancient oak pew at the bar, I tipped my horse hair wig backwards to feel the full force of the judicial eye of approval on my face, and I thought, "Thank the Lord for Vanderbilt English 101."

Needless to say, I did win. It is curious how one remembers the little things.



"I always believed I was going back to East Africa," says Phillip Aliker, BA '85. Although now living in England as a barrister at law, Aliker relishes in the prospect of being a judge in Uganda. "If the opportunity ever arose to assume a judicial appointment, I'd grab it with both hands."

personal commitment to the region, inevitably his years at Vanderbilt play a significant part too. Though he had traveled extensively—both internationally and within the United States—before attending the university, Alier says while it is one thing to travel, there is a significant difference when one resides and immerses one’s self in a foreign culture and tries to become settled.

“One of the most valuable forms of education anyone can have is living in another country,” he says. “The obvious benefit is that you learn about another culture, another people. But more importantly, it challenges you about the things you believe and the things you do. I think that when you’ve been challenged in this way

once, you’re much more open to experiences everywhere. It whets your appetite for travel, and as you travel, you become aware of the problems, perceptions, and beliefs of other people.”

These days, he travels regularly to all parts of the African continent, and regularly welcomes guests from East Africa to London. Additionally, with a fairly recent emphasis on alternative dispute resolution in Uganda, mediation provides the framework for a new approach to the resolution of commercial cases in a way that can benefit very much from Alier’s legal expertise without requiring his permanent residency.

Beyond travel and personal relationships with all manner of East African government and civic representatives, Alier is active in a number of programs and organizations that train and mentor young African lawyers and address important social issues and economic issues within Africa.

Through his work with International Lawyers for Africa, which provides experience and training in international law to top Afri-



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can lawyers, he regularly works with Ugandan attorneys completing three-month internships in London. He also works closely with the International Law Project as it conducts advocacy training in East Africa, and the Commercial Bar Association, which forms close partnerships between commercial law firms and East African governments. He is heavily involved with The Royal African Society and its work with British Parliament dealing with poverty reduction in Africa.

Despite all of these efforts, he is still ultimately interested in direct legal work in Uganda. The undiminished urge to do more stems, in no small part, from his memories of a country ruled by dictator Idi Amin, the man directly responsible for Alier’s family departing from their home. He remembers distinctly the abduction and murder of the Chief Justice from the High Court of Uganda by Amin’s soldiers. Hearing of that murder made him realize “the rule of law in Uganda was dead.” Alier is determined that it should remain resurrected and consolidated for all time.

In addition to his other work with and for the countries of East Africa, Alier would ultimately like to work within the judiciary of Uganda. A slightly complicated prospect due to his residency in the United Kingdom, a judgeship is something he considers with a long view.

“I’m desperate to make a contribution to the law in Uganda, and I would consider it remiss of me not to make my interest quite clear. There isn’t any money in it, but I care, and I want to make a contribution. I’ve left the matters with the authorities by making them aware that if the opportunity ever arose to assume a judicial appointment, I’d grab it with both hands.”