



CLIFF HUDSON (L'80)

BY ANNE CASSIDY

Cliff Hudson (L '80) admits that his timing could have been better when he moved back to his native Oklahoma City from Baltimore only months before the oil industry bottomed out. "The economy was booming until the moment my wife and I moved back. When they saw us arrive, they pulled the plug," Hudson says with a laugh. "The oil bust that occurred after the summer of 1982 changed law practice and the economy altogether."

It also changed the course of Hudson's career, forcing him to, as he puts it, "make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." If the boom had continued, Hudson might have used his J.D. from Georgetown Law to follow a "conventional law practice route," he says.

Instead, he took a job as legal counsel for Sonic Drive-In, then a privately held company that had "hit something of a financial low point when I came in with a new management team in 1984," he says. Hudson and his partners saw the company's potential. Sonic had retro car-hops and an all-American menu of burgers and fries; it oozed nostalgia.

By 1986 Hudson had sharpened his skills in business, accounting and corporate finance, and he and the management team bought the company and "set about trying to turn things around," he says. "We used Frankie Avalon in our commercials back in the 1980s, which was intended to play up the whole 1950s connection." That was one of countless brand boosters that, along with a host of careful management decisions, put the company on the fast track.

When Sonic went public in 1991, Hudson increased his ownership in the company. He was named president and chief executive officer in 1995 and chairman of the board in 2000. A company that he and his partners paid \$10 million for in 1986 is worth \$2 billion today. The largest drive-in chain in the country, Sonic owns, operates and franchises 3,000 restaurants.

The three years Hudson spent at Georgetown Law are crucial to his success, he says. "The quality of education I received in analytical thinking, separating the inseparable and finding similarities in disparate things — I use those on a daily basis," he says. In addi-

tion, he praises the quality and longevity of the relationships he forged at the law school: "The last time I talked to one of my law school classmates was yesterday."

Hudson acknowledges his debt to the school by giving back in a variety of ways. "I'm happy to have been a contributor to various efforts over time financially," he says. Hudson serves on Georgetown Law's Board of Visitors and meets with students to talk about alternative career models. "That's a very fun thing to do," he says. "Everybody kind of assumes that you'll pursue the same path, so it's nice to talk about different things."

In 2005, Hudson received Georgetown Law's Paul R. Dean Award, which is given annually to outstanding alumni who have exhibited leadership to the school and the legal profession. Hudson — who from 1994 to 2001 served as chairman of the board of directors of the Securities Investor Protection Corporation, a presidential appointment — was also recently named to the board of trustees of the Ford Foundation. "I've been very involved in public education initiatives in what I think has been a pretty successful way and they were intrigued with that," he says.

The public education initiatives Hudson mentions refer to his service as chairman of the Oklahoma City School Board. First, he co-chaired a voter-approved drive to raise \$530 million through a combination of property and sales tax. Next, he has overseen the building and renovation of numerous Oklahoma City schools and the upgrading of their systems and finances. "The average school bus was 17 years old; now it's one and a half years old," Hudson says. "It's a pretty dramatic turnaround of the system. We're seeing significant improvement of academic performance as well."

Of course, Georgetown Law knows all about this, Hudson says: "The physical transformation of the law center is extraordinary, but it's only symbolic of the foundation laid for legal education, how Georgetown Law is now in a position to move to a whole different level in terms of the global economy and the role it can play."