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# A GLOBAL MISSION

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Art DeFehr (MBA 1967) has balanced a dual career as the long-time CEO of Canadian furniture company Palliser and a leader of human rights causes worldwide.

by April White



Photo by V. Tony Hauser

[Art DeFehr \(MBA 1967\)](#) didn't plan to become a businessman. The Canadian-born DeFehr always imagined life as a diplomat—until he ran afoul of the FBI.

As a college student in Indiana, DeFehr had become involved in anti-Vietnam protests and the civil rights movement. He marched with Martin Luther King Jr. at Selma and spent time at Kolonia Farms, an interracial community in Georgia that was the target of boycotts and violence. "It was a very moving time for me," DeFehr says now. But when he returned to Canada, he discovered that his FBI file prevented him from holding the necessary security clearances for the government job he thought was waiting for him.

DeFehr instead decided to attend HBS and join the family business, Palliser Furniture. He has now been a fixture at Palliser for more than 50 years. He was CEO of the 2,000-employee firm from 1984 to 2015 and continues to sit on its board. But he never gave up his ambition to have an international impact. For the last half century, DeFehr has circled the globe—141 countries by his count—looking for places where his business expertise could reshape response to complicated humanitarian crises.

“I was raised a pacifist, with a lot of emphasis on service and human rights,” says DeFehr of his focus on humanitarian aid. He grew up in the Mennonite faith, the son of Russian refugee parents, and feels a strong connection to other displaced communities. That’s how he ended up in Bangladesh in the 1970s. Post-civil war, tens of millions of people had been driven from their homes. To assist with the country’s efforts at rebuilding, DeFehr developed a crop-diversification strategy. He spent two years establishing the project, which is still in operation today. “Bangladesh was my starting point,” observes DeFehr. “I got my understanding of how the world of refugees and poverty worked and how I could help.” (His brother helped to run the family business in DeFehr’s absence.)

After Bangladesh, DeFehr was next on the border of Cambodia and Thailand as one of the organizers of the “land bridge,” an unofficial cross-border effort to allow displaced Cambodians to return to their country after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. Then it was on to Somalia, where he served as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and cofounded International Development Enterprises, which uses business principles—not charity—to promote development. He is still active on the organization’s Canadian board. After that, he headed to Ethiopia, where he worked to address the growing famine in the region in the early 1980s, even before it became worldwide news. The phone kept ringing. “I was always interested in the most difficult situation,” DeFehr notes. “They were all organizational problems.”

Today, DeFehr, 76, remains engaged around the world. He still serves as director of the LCC (Lithuanian Christian College) International University, in Klaipėda, which he helped to establish in 1991 as the country fought for independence from the Soviet Union. “I negotiated that when there were still tanks around the Lithuanian parliament,” he recalls. “The university’s mission is to promote democracy and civil society in a challenging part of the world,” he says. “LCC is a political statement in the shape of a university.” DeFehr is currently focused on recruiting students from Syria and northern Iraq.

Elsewhere, DeFehr has developed an idea for an overland shipping route in southern Mexico to rival the Panama Canal. Business opportunities in that part of the world, he says, would end mass migration from the region. He never considered his humanitarian work to be at odds with his business activities. In fact, his international experiences have informed Palliser’s strategic decisions. “We’ve acted globally for the past 40 years,” he says. In the 1990s, when many of his competitors were moving to China, DeFehr decided instead to invest in Mexico, where his company now has several factories, a decision that has served Palliser well. “I can’t say that you are going to be more successful in business if you take human rights into account,” he says. “But one can respect human rights and also be successful in business.”

DeFehr knows his dual-track career is an anomaly. Most people spend decades in business and then, after they retire, turn to charitable work. DeFehr’s advice: “Don’t wait. To do your best work, you have to do it throughout your life.”