



Jeffrey MacMillan/Capital Business

## WHAT IT TAKES

# A persistent voice for human rights

By AVIS THOMAS-LESTER

Jared M. Genser was a law school student working for a human rights organization in London in 2000 when he got involved in the case of a British citizen, James Mawdsley, then 27, who had been given a 17-year jail sentence in solitary confinement in Burma for passing out pro-democracy leaflets. Genser took the case to the United Nations, persuaded members of Congress to write letters to the Burmese junta urging Mawdsley's release and was at London's Heathrow Airport when Mawdsley was reunited with his family after 416 days in jail. A year later, he co-founded Freedom Now, a nonprofit group that works to secure the release of "prisoners of conscience." He is a partner at DLA Piper, where he specializes in public international law and human rights cases. On Monday, June 7, he will be awarded the Charles Bronfman Prize, which recognizes young Jewish humanitarians involved in values-inspired work. Genser, 37, is married to Lisa; they have a son, Zachary, 2, and live in Bethesda.

## WHY HE'S SUCCESSFUL

Genser's clients have included Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese pro-democracy opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate who has been held under house arrest for 15 of the last 19 years, and Ayub Masih, a Pakistani Christian unjustly sentenced to death for blasphemy. "I think the character trait that I've developed over time ... has been persistence ... The work also requires substantial capability to work with people all across the political spectrum and all parts of society, from nonprofit groups to government to media to business leaders, and to be able to build coalitions of people who can collectively view what you are doing as important and to get behind those efforts."

## A MAJOR OBSTACLE

The Freedom Now case of Chinese dissident Yang Jianli, who was black-

listed by his government for testifying to the U.S. Congress about Tiananmen Square. "He went back to China to observe labor unrest and was caught and accused of being a spy for Taiwan. Going up against China is not an easy task ... It required a level of persistence that was beyond what I ever thought was possible. It was a five-year odyssey."

## FIRST JOB

He volunteered with a home hospice program as a teenager and worked at a McDonald's on Rockville Pike from ages 15 to 17 while attending the Landon School. "My parents had an interesting deal with me, which was that if I was working, I would get an allowance, and if I wasn't working, I wouldn't. I learned later that's what many of us would call the earned income tax credit ... I did the Saturday morning breakfast shift for two years."

## BEST JOB

His current position at DLA Piper. "Because I am working in the area of public international law and human rights in my day job, and because it provides me with such a strong platform to support my voluntary opportunities and activities, it's really been a phenomenal place for me to be."

## SMARTEST MOVE

Taking a year off from undergraduate work at Cornell University to work in Maryland on the first statewide community service requirement for high school graduation. He later earned a master's at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and a law degree from the University of Michigan. "I was on the road working with high school and middle school students and trying to inspire them to get involved with community service ... To have that at 20 years old kind of gave me a sense that if I had a chance to unleash my potential, that I might actually be able to make something of myself and have an impact on the world."

## BIGGEST CHALLENGE

"It has been a big challenge to transform Freedom Now from an all-volunteer group with a lot of scrappy young lawyers to a full-time endeavor with staff and an office. ... We've been able to raise a fair amount of support from foundations, but to do this in the midst of the financial crisis had been an ongoing challenge."

## WHAT INSPIRES HIM

His clients. "The stories of people who, despite incredible odds and incredible challenges that they are facing, manage to persevere and prevail."

## WHAT'S NEXT

"I would love to do a stint in government at the right time and in the right type of position in the human rights field. I could see myself in some point in the future running a large nonprofit. So I really don't know exactly what the future is going to hold. I know that I love what I'm doing now. As long as I continue to love what I'm doing, I'm kind of happy where I am."

## ADVICE TO THE ASPIRING

"I advise people to follow their passion. If you are following your passion, even if you are not successful, you'll be pretty pleased that you tried. And if you're not successful, you will learn to get up, dust yourself off and give it another try ... I like to joke that my résumé of failures is twice as long as my résumé of successes."

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Avis Thomas-Lester talks to achievers in the fields of business, government, law, education, entertainment and public service about their path to success. Her blog, *Rapid Reinvention*, and this feature, *What It Takes*, can be found at [views.washingtonpost.com/on-success/](http://views.washingtonpost.com/on-success/).