Homeward Bound

Peter Weil ’70, JD’74
By Karen Roach ’82
Wisconsin Alumni Association

Peter Weil can find a Wisconsin connection in nearly everything he does.

Never mind that the Los Angeles-based business lawyer hasn’t lived in the Badger State for 35 years.

When it comes to his alma mater, Weil has a diversified portfolio. Averaging four trips to Wisconsin each year, he serves on the University of Wisconsin Foundation Board of Directors and has worked with the departments of Political Science, History and Admissions, as well as the UW Law School, the Center for Jewish Studies, the College of Letters and Science, and the UW Children’s Hospital. He was also able to check in with his two oldest children, Sarah ’02 and Adam ’08, when they were on campus. (The jury is still out on whether his preteens, Alex and Kaley, will follow in their father’s footsteps.)

His wife, Julie, a graduate of the University of Illinois and Northwestern University Law School, has come to accept his UW passion as part of life. Weil says, “She’ll hear me expound on an obscure topic with someone and she’ll ask me later, ‘OK, Peter, what’s the Wisconsin connection?’”

Peter and his brother Les grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, the sons of German-Jewish refugees who fled Hitler and came to the United States in the late 1930s.

As a high school junior in the summer of 1965, Weil learned about a speech and debate institute hosted by the University of Wisconsin and he convinced his cousin Ronnie to sign up with him. The boys lived in a dormitory on Elm Drive, along the lakeshore. “It was a whole new world and I fell in love with it,” Weil recalls.

A year later, the cousins enrolled as freshmen, sharing a room at Oxford House on West Gorham Street. Weil joined Pi Lambda Phi. “Fraternities were a big deal in 1966, but then the world changed,” he says. “By the time I was a senior, it was out of business.”

A history major, Weil had a curiosity about where he was living so he’d track down retired professors to ask them about Madison. He took a class with leading American historian Merle Curti during his last semester of teaching. “I was fortunate to have him and to be blessed with other great professors — Stanley Kutler, William Appleman Williams and James Willard Hurst — giants in their fields.”

After earning a master’s degree in American history from the University of California at Berkeley, Weil returned to Madison and enrolled in law school. “A lot of what I’ve been able to accomplish has been the result of the superb education I received at UW Law School,” Weil says.

He practiced law in Chicago for three years before moving to Los Angeles in 1977. Today he is a managing partner in the 110-lawyer firm of Glaser, Weil, Fink, Jacobs & Shapiro, LLP, and a widely recognized expert in real estate law.
A project with which he has been heavily involved the past four years is known as CityCenter, a $9.2 billion, 18 million square foot mixed use development in Las Vegas that is being developed by the firm’s client, MGM MIRAGE. Head of the company’s outside legal team, Weil lights up when he talks about the size and scope of a project that involves eight different world-class architects. “It’s the largest environmentally sustainable real estate development in history,” says Weil. “I’m fortunate to work on it.”

Weil is a devoted citizen of Los Angeles — and the world. He has provided advice and guidance to city and state leaders and served on the city’s planning and airport commissions. He is a long-time leader of the American Jewish Committee, serving as president of the L.A. Chapter and as a national board member. He also serves on the boards of the Skirball Cultural Center and the American Friends of The Hebrew University.

“Peter has rare gifts. He is able to bring organizations together, politicians from different parties together, all for the common good. His vision becomes the vision of large groups, and he is a true agent for change,” says Rabbi Gary Greenebaum, executive director of the American Jewish Committee in Los Angeles.

Weil explains, “I’m blessed that I’ve found some projects that I’m passionate about — and people, in L.A., in Madison and in Israel, who will entertain some ideas that I have. I like to put people together and create win-win situations.”

“I’m enthusiastic about a lot of things,” he says. “But I like nothing more than to talk about the University of Wisconsin.”

Each year, Weil and wife Julie host a reception for L.A.-area students who have been admitted to the University of Wisconsin but have not yet decided to enroll. “It’s typically 70 or 80 kids and their families,” he says. “We talk about Madison and we answer questions.”

I tell people that if you want to get a world-class education and have a great time in the process, go to UW-Madison,” Weil says. “Every so often, I get a note that says, my parents and I went to your function and we were curious enough that we went back to Madison. I wanted you to know I just completed my first year and it was the best year of my life.”

Some 20,000 UW graduates live in the L.A.-area, the largest concentration of alumni outside of the Midwest. Weil is a founding member of the UW Foundation’s Los Angeles Committee, and he hosts meetings at his law firm’s offices. “Everyone shows up,” he quips.

“L.A. is an interesting place: it’s still a meritocracy, the climate is great and there are a lot of Midwesterners here — a lot of good people,” Weil says. “But my heart is still in Madison.”

A former marathon runner, Weil recently built his dream home gym where he does weight training, aerobics and Pilates. “It’s great — the whole family uses it,” he says. Weil covered the walls with framed vintage posters of Madison, a reminder that everything in his life has a Wisconsin connection.

— Peter Weil ’70, JD’74 is a 2009 recipient of the Distinguished Alumni Award from the Wisconsin Alumni Association. Learn more at uwalumni.com/daa.