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## PROFILE

Moving with steady determination, Los Angeles attorney and real-estate developer Frederick M. Nicholas is hard at work on yet another volunteer project.

This time, Nicholas is shepherding the mammoth development of the Walt Disney Concert Hall, an effort some experts say has the potential to be an architectural masterpiece upon its expected completion in 1995.

It is a familiar role for Nicholas, who in 1970 founded Public Counsel, which today has become the largest pro bono law firm in the country.

Nicholas, 69, also has played prominent roles in other major projects, including establishment of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and development of new buildings for the Los Angeles Dance Gallery and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

### Frederick M. Nicholas



**Position:** Founder, Public Counsel  
**Law Degree:** USC Law Center, '52  
**Age:** 69

Working quietly and effectively behind the scenes, Nicholas for more than three decades has been one of the little-noticed architects of California culture.

"It's important to give something back to the community," says Nicholas, recently honored by Public Counsel with its first "Founders Award."

Nicholas is a man with an artist's sensitivity and vision of what a community should be, and the role that lawyers should play in it.

Sure, lawyers should go out there and earn a professional wage, he says. He did it himself. But a lawyer's relationship with the community doesn't end there.

"We as lawyers are in a special position in our society," he says. "We make the rules and tend to assume the positions of true power. Our society revolves around the law. That gives us an equally special duty to preserve and improve our society and somehow make it better."

So deep does this belief run, that Nicholas left law practice — his own firm, no less — in favor of full-time real estate development.

"My partners kept telling me not to spend so much of my spare time working on community activities," he says, chuckling. "So I decided I could do without partners."

As head of the Hapsmith Co. in Beverly Hills, Nicholas came to enjoy great success in the development of shopping centers and other commercial projects.

But in some respects, it seems that for Nicholas, law and business have been

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more means to an end — serving the greater public good — than ends in themselves.

Over the last three decades, Nicholas has logged in thousands of hours volunteering his time, legal skills and judgment to a broad range of causes and concerns.

"He loves the diversity of life," says Ira Yellin, an attorney/real estate developer in Los Angeles and a protege. "He's not the close-minded type who closets himself from things.

"To the contrary, he has a very broad and sophisticated range of interests and is willing to be exposed to everything that life has to offer. Because of that, he is a very interesting and informed person, which also makes him very adept at dealing with people of diverse interests."

Richard Koshalek, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, described

Nicholas as a "consensus builder" who makes tough decisions without alienating people in the process.

"If Fred had not been here, it would have been almost impossible to get our new building built," he said, adding that Nicholas "is probably the foremost leader in the arts in Los Angeles."

"And," he said, "based on his past contributions and what is promised for the future, Fred's legacy will be one of quality."

Nicholas says his public involvements lead him "from project to project." His latest — the Walt Disney Concert Hall — may be among his most ambitious yet.

Besides the usual hurdles that come with getting the project finished on time and within budget, Nicholas shoulders the challenge of harmonizing the artistic energies of respected talents from diverse spheres, including Architect Frank O. Gehry of Santa Monica, Japanese sound designer Dr. Minoru Nagata and

Santa Monica graphic designer Deborah Sussman.

While he frequently can be found pouring over plans for the permanent new home of a non-profit organization, Nicholas' steady influence also can be felt throughout the public interest community.

For instance, he holds or has held fiduciary positions with the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation, Pitzer College, the American Federation of the Arts, the American Arts Alliance, the Music Center of Los Angeles County, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and the California Economic Development Commission.

But despite the magnitude and breadth of his activities, Nicholas proceeds with a sense of quiet purpose rather than bravado.

"He's incredibly modest," says Steve Nissen, executive director of Public Counsel. "He asks for little in return for all he does. He just believes in the causes and projects he works on."

Nicholas says his wife, Joan, and his three children are crucial to rounding out his life. He also maintains his perspective by not taking himself too seriously.

"I try to divorce my ego from my function," he says.

Nicholas' unassuming attitude may explain why he hasn't lost the common touch.

"If someone works 30 or 40 years and doesn't have his integrity, he doesn't have anything," he insists.

Nicholas was born in New York in 1920. His family moved to Los Angeles when he was 13. He received a degree in journalism from USC — after having taken a prolonged break from school to serve in the Army during World War II, during which he was honored with a Bronze Star and a promotion to captain.

After a two-year stint as a reporter with United Press International, Nicholas said he realized his opportunities in journalism were too limited and decided to go into law.

He started off at the University of Chicago Law School — where he began collecting the first pieces of his personal art collection — and ultimately graduated from USC Law Center in 1952.

Nicholas joined Loeb & Loeb, working primarily on commercial paper and anti-trust, but left the firm four years later to form Swerdlow, Glikberg & Nicholas. He left practice in 1962.

Nicholas' impact on the law since then has been immeasurable — if only for his pivotal role in establishing Public Counsel. Nearly 4,000 volunteer attorneys participate in the organization's efforts, which are sponsored by the Los Angeles County and Beverly Hills Bar Associations.

While many share the firm's success

today, getting it started in 1970 was anything but a sure thing, despite the obvious need.

"There really wasn't anyone helping the poor," he recalls.

Inspired by a Ralph Nader luncheon speech, Nicholas was determined to do something rather than just watch society's less fortunate fall through the cracks.

But as with the development of many new ideas, Nicholas' initially ran into a brick wall.

"The younger lawyers were very enthusiastic, but the older ones thought that it was crazy because they thought lawyers would be competing against themselves for business," he said.

Finally, Nicholas negotiated peace with the old guard by promising that the fledgling volunteer-lawyers' group would take cases pertaining only to the public interest, and would not get involved in commercial matters.

With that hurdle surmounted, the Beverly Hills Bar gave the group a modest grant — so modest in fact that Nicholas paid for the balance of the group's first-year budget.

The Los Angeles County Bar Association began subsidizing Public Counsel a few years later. In 1980, the American Bar Association awarded the group the prestigious Harrison Tweed Award for outstanding community service by a bar association. Today, Public Counsel is considered the national model for effective organization of pro bono legal efforts.

Still, Nicholas says, there is much more to be done.

Law schools can encourage a greater public-interest role for its graduates.

Firm managers can give associates and partners greater freedom to handle pro bono cases and accordingly adjust the lawyers' billable quota.

While praising the movement among large firms toward in-house foundations, Nicholas also urges lawyers to resist the temptation to use contributions as an excuse to write off public duties.

"If every lawyer gave 1 to 5 percent of their time, which is not much, this would be an entirely different society," he says.

— RICHARD C. REUBEN