I became a lawyer because lawyers have the ability to take an American dream and turn it into an American reality. My father and mother dreamed of owning their own business, and a lawyer helped that dream to become a reality.

My first interaction with a lawyer occurred around age 11. My parents decided to incorporate our family-owned trash-hauling business. I remember accompanying my father and mother to the lawyer’s office. I recall asking my father why we needed to incorporate our business. My father explained that by incorporating, we would not lose our house if something went wrong with the business. Even today, when I am asked by start-up business owners about whether they need to incorporate or to form a limited liability company, I skip all of the legal technical talk and just tell that story. So far, not one person has decided to postpone forming some sort of separate business entity for her or his business. There is something about the prospect of losing one’s house that gets their attention.

The combination of growing up working in a family-owned business and having that early interaction with a business lawyer solidified my interest in being a business lawyer myself.

Watching my parents run our family-owned business showed me how entrepreneurship could create opportunities for our family that would not have been available had my father continued to work as an hourly employee. Over time, I saw the role the law played in every aspect of our business. After we incorporated, my parents borrowed money from a bank to purchase a new truck, negotiated with a distributor to acquire a special type of truck body to handle more trash, and hired our first full-time employee. At each of these intervals, contracts and other legal documents were involved.

Over the life cycle of our family business, I saw it grow as we made modest acquisitions of customers from some of our competitors. Ultimately, our family business was acquired as larger and better capitalized organizations entered the previously fragmented trash-hauling business. At each step along this continuum, a trusted business lawyer helped guide our family.

After graduating from law school, I joined a business-focused law firm in Columbus, Ohio, and began to pursue my goal of using the law to help business owners succeed. My passion for small business allowed me to grow a legal practice focused on supporting family-owned businesses in areas such as automobile dealerships, real estate developers, and light manufacturing.

My practice as a business lawyer has been very satisfying. In the business news coverage of most communities, it is often forgotten that most people are employed by employers who are “small businesses” as defined by the U.S. Small Business Administration. Most individuals do not work for the large employers that cities and states seek to entice to locate in their jurisdictions. Consequently, the opportunity to work with the small business owners who drive our nation’s economy continues to be very gratifying.

My life as a business lawyer has also been enriched by my opportunity to serve on the boards of various civic and charitable organizations. Serving on the board of my local hospital system and on the board of my local community college has been a great way to support my community while gaining an opportunity to meet other civic and business leaders. Almost without exception, it has been my experience that most nonprofit organizations are very interested in having a lawyer on their board. Lawyers bring unique problem-solving and managerial skills that are helpful to nonprofit organizations.

Bar association activities have also played a significant role in my legal career. In particular, my involvement with the American Bar Association has allowed me to join in commercial legal reform efforts in six countries on the continent of Africa. Understanding how strong economies are anchored by a clear and predictable legal system, I have eagerly participated in missions aimed at helping developing democracies secure the benefits of modern commercial legal practices as a way to attract foreign investment and trade opportunities.

Our country has been built by the dreams and aspirations of people like my parents and others who through sheer determination, and often with the valuable assistance of knowledgeable lawyers, have been able to turn those dreams into realities.