

Immigration attorney honored

By MICHAEL C. DUKE

AJC will present immigration law pioneer, Charles Foster, with Institute of Human Relations Award

The Houston Chapter of the American Jewish Committee has selected attorney Charles Foster, of Tindall & Foster, P.C., for its prestigious Institute of Human Relations Award. Foster will receive the honor at the AJC's upcoming Institute of Human Relations Award luncheon on Nov. 13 at the Hyatt Regency Houston. Co-chairs of the event are Robert Mosbacher, Sr., of Mosbacher Energy, and Mike Ballases, chairman, Houston Region, JPMorgan Chase.

B.O.I. (born on Galveston Island), Foster spent the majority of his childhood in the South Texas border town of McAllen. And, it was from this experience, living literally at the meeting place of two countries, the United States and Mexico, that the young Foster developed a penchant – and passion – for international relations.

“Growing up, I had as much access to the international world as one could have had. And, as a youngster, I instinctively drew different conclusions than most people around me: They would always ask, ‘Why don’t those people [of Hispanic heritage] learn English?’ And, I was always thinking, ‘It’s a two-way street’ – if you say they should learn English, then shouldn’t we also learn some Spanish? After all, we’re within walking distance of the U.S.-Mexico border,” the now 60-something attorney recalled in a recent interview with the JH-V.

Having followed his own advice and studied Spanish in grade school, Foster applied these skills and earned a B.A. degree in government from The University of Texas at Austin, with a focus in international studies. Inspired by the literary character Atticus Finch in Harper Lee’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, “To Kill a Mockingbird,” Foster then went on to study law at The University of Texas School of Law and, again, gravitated toward international issues. While pursuing his J.D. degree, which he earned in 1967, Foster served as president of the International Law Society; cofounded the Texas International Law Journal; helped organize the Texas-Guanajuato Law School Annual Exchange Program; and won a Rotary International Fellowship to study at the Universidad de Concepcion in Chile.

Initially considering a career with the State Department, Foster, after graduating from law school, instead went to work for a large New York Wall Street firm. And although he took every available international law course while in school, the young attorney soon found out that he was ill prepared for the demands of practicing international law in the real world. Determined to make up for this deficit, Foster soon began to draw a correlation between the practice of international law and the need to specialize in immigration – a field he later would pioneer.

“Almost from day one, and by pure coincidence, I was assigned to do an immigration

case. And, from that moment on, I thought that if I'm going to be a successful international lawyer, I'm going to need to know something about immigration because, as a kid growing up in McAllen, I came to learn that international work had something to do with the movement of not only goods and services across the border, but also people. The only problem was, that at this time, nobody else was thinking this way yet," he explained.

When Foster decided to return to Texas and settle in Houston, he found that few lawyers, if any, were sustaining a practice solely on immigration cases. Foster, however, with the opening of his own firm in the early '70s, soon changed that. A trailblazer, he was among the first lawyers in the United States to develop an international law practice centered upon immigration, thus proving it was a substantive and professional field. Moreover, he is credited with helping immigration law become a designated field of specialization by which one could be board certified by the State of Texas, and since has cultivated one of the preeminent international and immigration law firms in the country – and world.

Recognized as one of Texas' top lawyers by Texas Monthly and Texas Lawyer, Foster currently serves as president of Tindall & Foster, P.C., and heads its Immigration Law Section. He also is the honorary consul general of the Kingdom of Thailand, a post he has held with distinction since 1997.

Among his many community activities, Foster serves as chairman of the Greater Houston Partnership's Immigration Task Force, which is working to raise public and private support for comprehensive and compassionate immigration reform. He also is a member of the Anti-Defamation League's Texas 2000 Foreign Policy Group; serves on the board of directors of Holocaust Museum Houston; and worked as the principal advisor to George W. Bush on U.S. immigration policy during the 2000 presidential campaign, as well as having briefed four presidential hopefuls for 2008 on the importance of immigration reform.

Among his many accolades and awards, Foster is the recipient of several royal decorations from His Majesty the King of Thailand; is featured in the international bestselling memoir, "Mao's Last Dancer," by Li Cunxin (and the forthcoming film adaptation, scheduled for release in December 2008); and played a central role in the installation of the historical markers, one on Pelican Island and the other on Galveston's Strand Street, that tell the story of Jewish immigration to the United States by way of the Galveston Plan.

On being chosen for the AJC's Institute of Human Relations Award, Foster remarked: "I'm incredibly grateful and pleased. The AJC does important work, and a lot of that work reflects those interests and values that I hold dear, such as in the field of human rights and immigration, so this truly is an honor."

On the significance of being honored by a Jewish organization, the immigration law specialist commented: "I see that the Jewish community, which obviously comprises the bulk of the AJC's membership – many of its members are likely second- or perhaps third-generation immigrants – doesn't have to look too far back in the family tree to identify

with the plight of immigrants. And yet, invariably, there's the tendency, with all immigrant groups, to forget, or not want to be reminded, of what it was like. . . .

“In many ways, this issue that we're faced with today of the plight of immigrants who don't learn the language, who live together in what are called 'barrios,' but at another time could have been called 'ghettos,' people who are often labeled as 'the wrong kind of people,' who came here with virtually nothing and in many cases were not accepted and were viewed as a group so different that it could not assimilate – this issue should resonate with the American-Jewish community today. And, that a prominent Jewish organization, the AJC, whose members include so many second and third-generation immigrants, has decided to honor a man whose life's work is immigration, this is of great significance to me personally,” he concluded.

For information about the Institute of Human Relations Award luncheon, call the AJC at 713-439-1202, or visit www.ajc.org.