

# Attorney's love of languages opened a pathway to law

By Brian Cox



Nicholas “Nick” Phillips has a knack for languages.

In addition to English, the California attorney speaks fluent Mandarin Chinese, as well as conversational Japanese and Spanish. He’s also studied Latin, Hindi, and Urdu.

Perhaps it’s not surprising then to learn that he taught high school Latin for several years at his high school alma mater before becoming a lawyer.

Phillips’ fluid language skills have allowed him to represent a wide range of clients with global interests, including acting as in-house and outside general counsel for companies located in the U.S., China, and Japan. As an associate attorney now in the Business Transactions and Real Estate Practice Groups at Coleman & Horowitz, LLP in Fresno, Calif., Phillips focuses on the needs of closely-held businesses over the course of their life cycle, as well as lower middle market mergers and acquisitions throughout California.

He finds the work stimulating.



**Attorney Nick Phillips and his wife, Ashley, with their son, Leo, who is 5. Ashley is a pediatric psychologist at Valley Children’s Hospital.**

“I’m learning every day,” he says. “When I’m not doing mergers and acquisitions, I’m advising on corporate governance issues and shareholder disputes, trying to steer people away from litigation because it’s expensive, time consuming, and the outcomes are uncertain. Mainly, I’m trying to play peacemaker.”

Born in Providence, R.I., Phillips’ family moved west to Medford, Ore., when he was six. The move was prompted by his mother’s acceptance of a position as a doctor of internal medicine at The Medford Clinic.

Phillips grew up on a 4-acre farm situated in a small mountain valley populated with pear orchards and that provided prime opportunities for hiking and horseback riding. While many of his friends were into hunting, Phillips was more prone to building desktop gaming PCs and playing video games.

“Typical nerdy stuff,” he says with a laugh.

He attended St. Mary’s School, a Catholic preparatory school where his father was a Latin teacher.

He developed an interest in a career in federal law enforcement after attending the National Youth Leadership Forum in Washington, D.C., and meeting with FBI special agents. The work aligned with his strong belief in social justice.

“I thought it was interesting that they go after white collar criminals,” says Phillips of the experience. “It seemed more noble than going after impoverished people stealing bread to survive so I thought maybe one day I could join their ranks.”

After high school, Phillips headed back to the state of his birth to continue a family tradition of attending Brown University – both his parents, an uncle, and a cousin had studied there. With his eyes on joining the FBI, he double majored in history and Latin. His honors thesis discussed universal military training legislation, which narrowly failed to pass the U.S. Congress in the early 1950s. For the thesis, he conducted research at the National Archives in College Park, M.d., where he reviewed Cold War documents about the continuity of government in the aftermath of a nuclear war.

While at Brown, Phillips developed a deeper interest in South Asian history. He traveled to India for two months, endeavoring to see as much of the country as possible by train and rickshaw.

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**Nick has introduced Leo to his passion for martial arts and the two practice together on Saturday mornings.**

Following graduation, Phillips returned home to pursue a master's degree in U.S. history at the University of Oregon. While there, he met his first wife, who was born in China and was working on her Ph.D. in Chinese history. It was then he started learning Mandarin.

While she completed her doctorate, Phillips followed in his father's footsteps and began teaching Latin at St. Mary's School. While there, he helped start the first Confucius Classroom in the United States. The program financed the teaching of Mandarin to American high school students, which included textbooks and library books, teachers from China, funding for cultural events, and trips to China.

On one trip to China, Phillips spent his summer at the Shaolin Temple, studying kung fu under Shifu Zheng Hongfeng (Buddhist name: "Shi Yanzheng"), a monk who served as Abbot Shi Yongxin's bodyguard and headed up the country's international demonstration team. Shifu was also the head of Education and International Relations at Shaolin and accepted Phillips' invitation to teach at St. Mary's School through the Confucius Classroom program.

Shifu taught kung fu to St. Mary's students in PE classes for more than two years.

"It was like having Kobe Bryant teach you basketball in high school," says Phillips.

Phillips' connections with China continued to expand and deepen. He and his first wife were married in China where her father was Vice Minister of Health for Henan Province and her mother was Vice President of Henan University in Zhengzhou, the capital of the province.

Only days after the wedding, Phillips met 85 students, teachers, and parents from St. Mary's School at the Beijing airport for the Confucius Classroom's second summer trip to China. One of the students had a fever and was diagnosed with the swine flu. The group was quarantined at a hotel in Beijing for several weeks before most of the kids were allowed to return to the States. Phillips remained behind with a dozen students who still tested positive.

The incident brought international news coverage, and Phillips' management of the crisis drew the attention of a Chinese businessman who planned to start a venture in Massachusetts through the EB-5 investment visa program. He convinced Phillips to be his Vice President of Marketing.

The initial business model of the Cambridge Institute of Chinese Business Research was to send Harvard University students to China to meet business leaders and government officials and the company would then invest in startups sparked by the exchange.

The first group of students, however, were drawn from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, and they had few innovative business ideas.

"I quickly realized that I was spending all this money on marketing, but I was not getting a return on our investment, and that if I wanted to keep my job, we would have to do something that made money," says Phillips.



**Nick has a deep connection to China. His first marriage took place in Zhengzhou with a traditional Chinese wedding that involved Nick serving tea to his new in-laws: Xia Zuchang and Zheng Yuling. His parents and the principal of St. Mary's School, where Nick taught Latin, were also in attendance.**



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Drawing on his experience with establishing the Confucius Classroom, Phillips suggested the company could bring students from China and send them to St. Mary's School and other schools around the country. There were tens of thousands of Chinese families willing to pay high tuition dollars to send their children to American high schools.

Phillips successfully started more than 60 boarding school programs for the company, now called Cambridge Network, which markets itself as a consulting service promoting worldwide educational exchange.

The experience of building a business eventually led Phillips to consider obtaining a law degree. When his first wife received a tenure track with Valparaiso University teaching Chinese history, Phillips applied to the law school at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

For the next three years, Phillips spent his weekends in Valparaiso, Ind. playing the role of a faculty husband and mowing the lawn and the work week attending law classes in Champaign, Ill.

He received an externship with Mabuchi Motor Company in Tokyo, chosen in part because of his proficiency in Mandarin because the company had been the first Japanese company to open factories in China starting in 1964.



**As a young attorney working in Japan, Nick had the opportunity to visit the many temples in Kyoto.**

As part of the externship, Phillips began learning Japanese, and when he graduated from law school, he accepted a position with Mabuchi Motor as in-house corporate counsel. He worked in Japan for two years, the only American attorney in the company's legal department. He gained experience working mainly on commercial contracts, including terms and conditions for business-to-business sales of small DC motors, as well as antitrust, compliance, employment, securities, governance, formation of wholly owned subsidiaries, and other cross-border corporate transactions.

"I was thrown into the thick of it from the very beginning," recalls Phillips. "We were a public multinational corporation with all the problems that plague every public multinational corporation."

He worked on securities filings with the Tokyo Stock Exchange, policy papers on international trade, and antitrust cases. He was sent to China where he trained Chinese attorneys on how the company negotiated contracts for international sales of goods and was involved in a case study with Harvard Business School on integrating foreign managers into a global organization.

"I got to see firsthand what it was like to integrate the Japanese and Chinese factory managers and deal with issues that arose from that, everything from sexual harassment, to products liability and breach of contract," he says.

He worked all day and then in the evenings went to language school. He had the opportunity to travel to Phuket, Thailand, Saipan, Okinawa, Bali, Indonesia, and Cebu, Philippines. He snorkeled in Sipadan, an island off the coast of Malaysian Borneo. He recalls climbing Mt. Fuji and watching sumo wrestlers perform feats of strength at company picnics.

"It was fun in a lot of ways," he says. "I was learning a lot on the job and getting good at foreign languages, but I got kind of homesick."



**After law school, Nick's first job was serving as in-house corporate counsel with Mabuchi Motor Company in Tokyo.**



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So, when Phillips learned that his old school was in need of an in-house counsel to help guide the school through the transition of being a private independent day school with international students to a true boarding school, Phillips seized the opportunity to return home.

For the next five years, Phillips managed the school's expansion and helped guide it through the COVID-19 pandemic. By the time he left in 2022, the school had multiple sources of revenue, including programs that sent teachers overseas to provide St. Mary's curriculum on the campuses of foreign high schools so that the students could earn a St. Mary's diploma and not have to leave the country.

He remarried in 2018. His wife, Ashley, has a Ph.D. in pediatric psychology and was originally from the Fresno area. She encouraged him to try to pursue his goal of practicing corporate law in a law firm setting, which he admits can be a tough transition for professionals in mid-career.

He secured a position with a Minneapolis firm to support its transaction group on middle market mergers and acquisitions (M&A). While he and his wife never adapted fully to the cold of Minnesota, he gained valuable M&A experience, working on many middle market and lower-middle market deals, including some cross-border work.

The cold Minnesota winter drove Phillips and his wife back to sunny Fresno, where Ashley now works as a pediatric psychologist



**The Shaolin monk Shifu Zheng Hongfeng invited Nick to live with him at the Shaolin Temple for two weeks in the summer of 2006.**

at Valley Children's Hospital. The couple has a 5-year-old son, Leo, with whom Phillips has shared his love of martial arts. He also continues to enjoy traveling and learning about the world.

Phillips joined Coleman & Horowitz in March 2023. He represents businesses and their owners, including sellers and buyers of businesses, conducting due diligence and drafting stockholders or buy-sell agreements, operating agreements, NDAs, LOIs, and definitive and ancillary agreements to consummate stock and asset purchases.

"It's really wonderful here," he says. "It's a great corporate culture. The people are smart, competent, and very personable. I wanted a home for myself as a professional and I think I've really found it."



**Nick and Ashley married in 2018 and she encouraged him to pursue his goal of practicing corporate law in a law firm setting.**