

XLNC Partner Portraits – Interviews with Members

Meet Thomas Geisel



Thomas Geisel (right) as Mayor of Dusseldorf with Rafal Trzaskowski, Mayor of Warsaw

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As a business law firm in Dusseldorf, **VCvF.legal** offers tailor-made advice at the highest level across the entire spectrum of business law. The team of well-trained lawyers is approachable, loves short channels of communication and has a clear focus on their clients' needs. At VCvF.legal you will meet reliable advisors with a hands-on-approach and entrepreneurial mindset.

The VCvF.legal team works nationally and internationally, with passion and empathy. They develop sustainable solutions that are perceptive and comprehensible. The team of talented lawyers has been shaped by a lot of experience.



XLNC: *Mr Geisel, you held many other leadership positions before you became Mayor of Dusseldorf in 2014. Tell us about your background. What got you interested in politics and how did you become Mayor of Dusseldorf?*

Thomas Geisel: I grew up in a rather small town in southern Germany. I studied law and political science first in Freiburg, then in Geneva. After that I spent an

academic year as a Fulbright Scholar at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, where I earned an MA degree in Government. In 1990, I graduated with (what we call in Germany) the First State Exam, from Freiburg University. From 1990 to 1992, I was enrolled as a McCoy Scholar at the Master in Public Administration programme at The Harvard Kennedy School. In 1994, I received my Second State Exam in Law and was admitted as an attorney to the bar in Berlin.

I have always been interested in politics. This may have something to do with my family background; my father served for many years in the State Parliament of Germany's southwestern state of Baden-Wuerttemberg – 24 years as a member and 12 years as the Vice Chairman. My first paid job was also political – immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall I applied to be a legislative assistant with the Social Democratic group in the last, and first democratically elected, parliament of Eastern Germany. True fact that I had the opportunity to run for Mayor of Dusseldorf was a mixture of luck and coincidence. After spending 20 years in business, first with the privatisation agency Treuhandanstalt and then in the energy industry, it was in fact rather unusual for me to join politics and run for public office. However, I was asked, and honestly, I did not hesitate for one moment to go for it, even though it looked at the time rather hopeless for an SPD candidate to oust the CDU incumbent. I won with almost 60% of the vote.

XLNC: What was the biggest impact you had on the city of Dusseldorf during your term as Mayor?

Thomas Geisel: In retrospect, there were probably two issues I cared most about. The first was the issue of how to maintain and further develop economic growth and prosperity in the city. Since the late 1800s, economically Dusseldorf has been a very successful city. The most important way the city can contribute to that is to invest in education. During my tenure, the city invested in education – in preschools, elementary schools, high schools, vocational schools – more than EUR 1 billion, which is unparalleled in Germany. We also launched a Start-Up Initiative, creating an ecosystem that proved to be very conducive to attracting innovative business ideas and demonstrating that our city continued to have the appetite to be at the cutting edge of economic development. The other issue was how we as Dusseldorfers, but also non-Dusseldorfers, perceived our city. Dusseldorf had for quite some time suffered from the image of being a somewhat arrogant and “aloof” city. We not only established a new slogan – “Dusseldorf – live close, feel free” – that many people found very appropriate to describe the Dusseldorf way of life, we also demonstrated, for instance during the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016, that Dusseldorf is in fact a truly international, welcoming and compassionate city.

XLNC: What will you miss most from your time as Mayor of Dusseldorf?

Thomas Geisel: Being Mayor of an international, diverse and multifaceted city like Dusseldorf is, as I once said, “Life at its fullest.” This is what I sometimes miss, even though I don't miss the 24/7 job that goes along with it.

XLNC: You were Mayor of Dusseldorf for six years. What was your funniest experience during this time?

Thomas Geisel: Well, there have sometimes been funny events. I do remember an official visit when my guests – I won't disclose the country they came from – presented as their gift a hand-knotted carpet with my portrait on it. It was, to be honest, not easy to keep a straight face when I saw that. Or during Carnival, I sometimes wondered what was funnier – the costumes my wife and I were wearing or the comments I read about them in the press the next day.



Thomas with his wife Vera during Carnival

XLNC: *As Mayor, your tasks were manifold. You led the huge administration of Dusseldorf, you represented the city, you chaired an important economic and financial hub, and you planned, shaped and impacted, needless to mention, the political battles. What did you like least about the job as Mayor?*

Thomas Geisel: To be honest, there were very few things that I really disliked about my job as Mayor. I used to say that 85% of the many things I was doing I did because I liked to do them and only 15% because I had to do them. Even the things I did out of a sense of duty I usually more or less enjoyed except for maybe a few “political” debates that I considered to be either unnecessary or inappropriate.

XLNC: *...and what most?*

Thomas Geisel: Sometimes after a long work day I reviewed what I had done during the day – up to 20 meetings, appointments, events with people as diverse as business leaders, artists, community activists, politicians, etc. What a privilege, I thought then, to be the Mayor of such a great city! Which other job could possibly provide you with such a treasure of experience?

XLNC: *...and your most exciting or rewarding experience during this time and why?*

Thomas Geisel: Having a business background I was surprised and, to be honest, disappointed by how the city ran its own shareholdings. After all, one must be aware that the city of Dusseldorf holds significant economic assets with an important interest in, for instance, Germany’s third largest airport, an internationally operating trade fair company (Messe Dusseldorf), one of Germany’s largest local banks (Sparkasse), the local public transportation company, the utility company Stadtwerke, and much more, representing an economic value of several billion euros. On the supervisory boards of these companies the City is represented by Council members who are politicians and who, in my experience, do not always understand the difference between the job of a politician on the city council and the job of a supervisory board member representing the owner’s interests. However, setting up an appropriate and effective governance system is, as I had to learn, a thorny path to pursue.

XLNC: *What are some of the lessons learned during your time as Mayor?*

Thomas Geisel: As someone who came from business and had been out of politics for almost 20 years, I clearly had a lesson to learn that the criteria for success or failure are quite different in business and politics. While in business, at least eventually, the bottom line determines whether you are successful or not, in politics there are no clear and objective rules. Perception is reality quite often and the line between success and failure can be very narrow. For the manager I was who tended to take a rational and straightforward approach to get things done, this was sometimes a painful lesson to be learned.

XLNC: *As Mayor you attended many events – the position of Mayor of Dusseldorf is no nine-to-five job. You have a wife and five children. How did you balance your time between family life, hobbies, and a demanding and intensive job? What is your best advice for a good work-life balance?*

Thomas Geisel: That’s a difficult question because being Mayor of a city like Dusseldorf is in fact almost a 24/7 job with very little free time even on weekends.



Thomas with his wife Vera on his favourite running route by the Rhine

Two things were important to making this job halfway family-compatible. The first thing was that my wife accompanied me on many occasions so that we could spend at least some time together. And when we went to sports or cultural events quite often our kids also came along. The other thing was that I instructed my office that family had priority. When my wife or my kids called, I usually took the call and everything else had to wait. Also, family events and, for example, Parents' Day at our kids' schools enjoyed precedence over the usual Mayor's business in my agenda.

XLNC: What was the reason you left the political path and returned to your original career as business lawyer?

Thomas Geisel: Well, the most obvious reason why I left politics was that I lost the election. But as the saying goes, you have to leave when it's best. However exciting the last six years had been, I felt it was time to do something else. As implied by the title of the book I published about my time as Mayor – *Grenzgänger* – I have been walking the line between business and politics throughout my entire career and after six exciting and exhausting years in politics it was time to go back to business.

XLNC: What are you most looking forward to during your time at VCvF.legal?

Thomas Geisel: I think that VCvF is exactly the right place for me at this point in time. It's not a huge law firm with lots of bureaucracy and red tape if I may say so. It is rather an aspiring and "hungry" law boutique with excellent professionals, interesting clients and a scope I feel extremely comfortable with.

XLNC: What will your main tasks and responsibilities be at VCvF.legal and what will your role in XLNC be?

Thomas Geisel: Of course, I will take advantage of the extensive network that I have developed during my diverse professional career. My ambition is to assist our clients when they plan major transactions or when they want to develop and implement new and innovative

business models. When I worked at Treuhandanstalt, I was responsible for the privatisation and restructuring of major enterprises and industries in Eastern Germany. As Vice President, Gas Supply at E.ON Ruhrgas, I negotiated huge long-term gas supply agreements and was also involved in major arbitration proceedings. And as Mayor of Dusseldorf, I successfully convinced many companies from abroad to set up business in our city, which made Dusseldorf the frontrunner in Germany when it came to attracting direct foreign investment. Also, I was involved in substantial real estate transactions and major urban development projects. Thus, I believe I bring quite a lot of experience that may help to further grow the business of VCvF.legal.

XLNC: What is special about VCvF.legal?

Thomas Geisel: Well, it is, if I may say so, the best of all worlds both for clients and for lawyers. It's an inspiring working environment, in an unpretentious familiar atmosphere, that also leaves space for individual interests and endeavors. And the client gets timely, dedicated and highly professional advice in whatever legal matter to bring his or her business forward.

XLNC: What does the next year look like in terms of your vision?

Thomas Geisel: As a lawyer my aspiration is, of course, to assist our clients to run their businesses successfully and to facilitate whatever they plan in terms of projects and transactions. Also, I will try to inspire my colleagues to work hard and successfully and, in particular, to have fun doing it.

XLNC: What would you like to share with your XLNC colleagues?

Thomas Geisel: As somebody who has studied and lived extensively abroad and has led a truly international city like Dusseldorf, I would like to share my international experience with my colleagues. Who knows, maybe VCvF.legal can contribute to and benefit from the many international partnerships that have developed during my tenure as Mayor in the last six years.

“ XLNC: *What is your proudest accomplishment?*

Thomas Geisel: My family – my wife and my five daughters..

“ XLNC: *What is your business credo?*

Thomas Geisel: Aim high, try hard, and never give up.

“ XLNC: *In your spare time, what is your passion and why?*

Thomas Geisel: I enjoy spending my spare time with my family. I also love sports – long-distance running, cycling and skiing. The highlight in 2021 for me so far was traversing the “Route des Grandes Alpes” on my racing bike, and in October I plan to run the Venice Marathon. Also, I recently started playing the flute again with a member of the Dusseldorf Symphony Orchestra as my teacher.



Thomas with Belgian cyclist Eddy Merckx at the start of the Tour de France 2019 in Brussels

“ XLNC: *Which two or three personalities do you admire most and why?*

Thomas Geisel: Personally, my mother for her love, generosity, and hospitality. Politically, the former German Chancellor Willy Brandt for his charisma and vision. And in sports, the Belgian cyclist Eddy Merckx for his relentless ambition.

“ XLNC: *The best place to be other than your home or your office?*

Thomas Geisel: My running track along the Rhine, preferably together with my wife.

“ XLNC: *Your favourite cuisine?*

Thomas Geisel: Italian.

“ XLNC: *Beer, wine, or water?*

Thomas Geisel: All three depending on time, location, circumstance and company.

Thank you for your time.