When Andrew Puzder, JD ’78, was 10 and argued with his mother, she responded, “You’d make a good lawyer.”

“I had to ask her what a lawyer is,” Puzder recalls. “After she told me, I knew that was exactly what I wanted to be.”

So how did Puzder go from wanting to be a lawyer to becoming a leader in the hamburger industry? How did he go from trial lawyer, to corporate lawyer, to president and chief executive officer of CKE Restaurants Inc., which comprises more than 3,600 fast-food restaurants in 44 states, including more than 2,100 Hardee’s and 1,000 Carl’s Jr. restaurants?

After starting at Kent State University in 1968, he detoured for a few years to play guitar and sing in bands. He then graduated from Cleveland State University while also managing a music store to support his family. When Puzder decided to go to law school, he picked Washington University because of its strong reputation and because his $10,000 savings would pay three years’ tuition.

“Jules Gerard inspired me,” says Puzder. “He was a Professor Kingsfield-type from Paper Chase; students walked in scared and walked out knowing the law.”

He also has vivid recollections of Professors Gray Dorsey, Frank Miller, Robert Dixon, and Ronald Carlson.

After law school, Puzder worked at the law offices of Morris A. Shenker before joining The Stolar Partnership in 1984. He started out as a trial lawyer and, along the way, picked up corporate clients.

“It became increasingly hard to say, ‘See you in a month. I have a case to try,’ so I became a corporate lawyer,” Puzder explains.

He moved to California in 1991 to join Stradling, Yocca, Carlson & Yauth, where he remained until 1995. Then he became executive vice president and general counsel for Fidelity National Financial, Inc. In 1997 he became chief executive officer of Santa Barbara Restaurant Group, Inc. and also joined CKE as executive vice president and general counsel, where his job included franchising Carl’s Jr. The next year he also assumed the management of franchising for Hardee’s, a restaurant then up to its buns in debt.

In June 2000 Puzder was named president and chief executive officer of Hardee’s Food Systems, Inc., before moving to his leadership position in the parent company that September.

He relates the tale of his move with a modicum of surprise still in his voice: “In June of 2000 Bill Foley [chairman of CKE’s board] came into my office and said, ‘You need to run Hardee’s.’ ‘I need to do what?’ I asked. But two weeks later, sitting at my desk, I thought, ‘I can do this!’ ”

Traditionally, Puzder explains, restaurant executives move up from fry cook, grateful to exchange the kitchen for the boardroom and eager to learn the business. Conversely, Puzder knew business and eagerly studied the restaurants themselves. He has lowered Hardee’s debt from $700 million to $300 million and strengthened the company’s line of credit.

“We’re making a little money now,” he adds with a smile. “Being a trial lawyer helped me adjust quickly to a new business, and my corporate background helped me understand the numbers and our legal options. Being a lawyer was unquestionably an advantage. I also prayed a lot.”