



Alumni adoration

SUNY Buffalo Law grads share how UB shaped their future

BY MEGAN BLARR

Born and bred in Brooklyn, Dan Kohane applied to several law schools before graduating from SUNY New Paltz, which is located midway between Albany and New York City. He looked into some big-name, Ivy League schools including Harvard and Yale, but his first choice was actually a state university in Western New York ... SUNY Buffalo Law School.

Kohane, now a senior member of Hurwitz & Fine P.C. in Buffalo and chairman of the firm's insurance coverage and extracontractual liability teams, knew he wanted to attend a public law school outside New York City, for financial and personal reasons.

"(SUNY Buffalo) was affordable — a big issue for me since I put myself through law school," he said. "I am (also) a firm proponent of public education. In my last year of college, I served as president of a statewide student organization that advocated on behalf of SUNY students across the state."

Makau Mutua, dean of the law school, said affordability is a key benefit.

"For over 125 years, our law school has been preparing lawyers to become leaders of the bench and bar and serve their communities with distinction," he said.

"We need to deliver this education at a cost that is going to allow our graduates to pursue their aspirations without being shackled by a burdensome debt load," Mutua said.

Stephen Sharkey, a partner at Bond Schoeneck & King PLLC, also attended SUNY schools. He has an undergraduate degree in psychology from SUNY Geneseo and graduated from SUNY Buffalo Law School in 1998. Sharkey said his SUNY education was invaluable in preparing him for a legal career.

"First, it enhanced my writing and public speaking skills and taught me how to reason and think critically, which are all core skills necessary to becoming a successful lawyer," he said.

"Second, it exposed me to diverse opinions and ideas, which has assisted me in my practice by allowing me to listen to and consider opposing views and positions."

The law school also provided him with a vast network of alumni.

"(UB) helped me make connections and initially get my foot in the door in the Buffalo legal market," he said.

Marco Cercone, a partner at Rupp Baase Pfalzgraf Cunningham & Coppola LLC, also is a graduate and said the law school's connection to the community puts students in a better position of landing jobs and gaining practical skills.

"As a student, there are plenty of opportunities to work in the existing legal community through clerkships and internships that may lead to future employment," he said. "This kind of experience is critical to developing the tools that lawyers need to succeed outside the classroom."

Kohane, meanwhile, said his law school connections helped solidify his career.

"I had the opportunity to find a clerkship in a new downtown firm starting after my first year of law school in 1977," he said. "I am still there."

All three men said they have given back over the years by staying involved with the university.

Said Sharkey: "I have served as a mentor to first-year UB law school students since around 2003, and I was recently elected to serve on the board of directors of the UB Law Alumni Association, with whom I am currently actively involved."

Many alumni teach at UB, in addition to their day jobs.

"I have been an adjunct professor of insurance law for over 25 years," Kohane said. "It is the least I can do in return for the opportunities it has surely presented me in my career."

Dean Mutua described the alumni network as second to none. Students enjoy the benefits of alumni mentors and professors, he said.

"We can't ask for a more active and dedicated alumni," Mutua said. "They hire our students and, despite the challenging economy, are donating to the school in record amounts."

Like Kohane, Sharkey and Cercone ultimately pursued legal careers locally rather than leaving the region.

"There is no better place to raise a family than Western New York, which is why I came back to this area after graduate school (at George Washington University) and decided to go to UB Law," Cercone said.

"I wanted to work and live here, so why not go to law school in the very place I wanted to be?"

Kohane, the New York City native, said he stayed for primarily three reasons: "(A) great job, great legal community and no traffic."

These days, the school is focused on adapting and growing for current and future law students, said Mutua.

"I think the biggest change in the last several years is the heavy investment made in skills training," he said.

"We completely revamped our research and writing program (and) we know that our students have to enter practice better prepared, particularly given the challenging job market."

Still, there are things to be learned from times past.

Cercone recalled a professor's speech that ended his first-semester Constitutional Law class before breaking for the final exam.

"His message was that this profession is so important because lawyers have the ability to advocate for those who are unable to advocate for themselves," Cercone said.

"There's a tremendous responsibility to fight for the rights our founding fathers fought so hard for ... He encouraged our class to make a difference."

Megan Blarr is a freelance writer for the Buffalo Law Journal.

