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Double Duty

John B. Sheffer moves from the public arena to academia

John B. Sheffer climbed the rungs of public service one by one: Williamsville village trustee, mayor of Williamsville, the State Assembly, the State Senate. After nearly 18 years in politics, there was widespread speculation that he would accept nomination to run for the state Supreme Court.

He chose the University at Buffalo instead.

As 1995 begins, Sheffer is starting his second full semester as a senior fellow at the University. His dual appointment includes posts in both the Law School and the School of Architecture and Planning.

"It's been terrific and encouraging," Sheffer said of his experience at UB. "The deans and my colleagues on the faculty have all been more than cordial and supportive. And I've found that my practical experience in local and state government for nearly two decades has been a valuable resource in structuring a syllabus for the courses I'm teaching.

"I've not found it easy — it's been challenging at times, but it's exactly the type of challenge I was looking for."

His unusual dual appointment, Sheffer said, is "one indicator of a very deliberate and aggressive transdisciplinary effort at the University."

He's asked all the time, he said, about whether the two schools intersect in subject matter. "There has hardly been a day when I have not been impressed by the overlap that exists (between the law and architecture schools)," he said. "The overlap is huge, and particularly with the planning dimension. There are clearly policy dimensions to architecture as well, but the overlap with planning is enormous."

Sheffer, who received his J.D. from Syracuse University College of Law in 1973, was known in Albany as a thoughtful, resourceful lawmaker and a persistent advocate of good causes. His work included such significant agenda items as government reform, protecting the Great Lakes and the Erie Canal, and economic development, tourism, and tax and welfare reform.

The LeRoy Republican has brought that keen interest in public policy to the classroom.

"A major motivation of mine in retiring from the Senate and coming to UB was to teach," he said. "I had taught as an adjunct at some other schools, and did some guest lecturing, and I loved it. It's really a chance to take the policy-oriented work that I did for a couple of decades in government, and continue working on many of those same issues and challenges, but in an academic setting. I've got the chance to work with students and hopefully encourage them to look at government and policy-oriented models of the law."

Sheffer's role at UB has included major work on the University's multidisciplinary Governance Project (see article in this issue of UB Law Forum). He also is involved in establishing a new doctoral program in policy studies at the University — a program he hopes will admit its first candidates in the fall of 1995. "All of the curriculum discussion and discipline discussion in anticipation of that Ph.D. program has helped to discover that foundation of scholarship that I think is essential to a successful policy program," he said.

True to his appointment's hybrid
form, Sheffer’s courses in the spring semester include, at the Law School, Advanced Legislative Law and Policy, and at the School of Architecture and Planning, a “studio” called New York State in the Global Marketplace.

In his spare time he has been appointed to New York Governor George Pataki’s transition team, where he intends to play a policy role.