Newsmakers: Dennis Vacco, Paul Friedman

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DENNIS C. VACCO ’78 WINS ATTORNEY GENERAL POST

Dennis C. Vacco ’78, New York’s new attorney general, is the state’s chief lawyer in the administration of new Gov. George E. Pataki.

Running as a Republican in a state where Democrats outnumber Republicans by 1.3 million voters, Vacco won a stunning victory in the Nov. 8 election. He took office on Jan. 1.

Vacco, 42, is a product of UB Law who, until recently, taught Trial Technique in the Law School. “My only regret is that I will have to give up my adjunct position in the Trial Technique program,” he said soon after the election. For the past two years, he has been affiliated with the Buffalo law firm of Smith, Murphy & Schoeppele.

At a recent meeting of his transition team, Vacco promised to make the Department of Law as user-friendly as possible in serving the legal community and the public. He also vowed to introduce a new level of professionalism to the office.

Serving on his 39-member transition team are three people who are closely connected to the Law School: Vice Dean Alan S. Carrel ’67, Professor Lucinda Finley and Gordon R. Gross ’55, a senior partner in the Buffalo law firm of Gross Shuman Brizzle & Giffillan, who is the team’s vice chairman.

Vacco grew up in the Town of Brant, where his parents, Carmen and Mildred Vacco, still farm 2,200 acres. He served as U.S. attorney for New York’s 17 westernmost counties before being replaced by the incoming Clinton administration in 1993. Prior to his appointment as U.S. attorney, Vacco was chief of the Grand Jury Bureau in the Erie County district attorney’s office.

In 10 years with the district attorney’s office and five years as U.S. attorney, Vacco proved his effectiveness. His high-profile convictions included several politically sensitive ones, such as the cases of former Buffalo Parks Commissioner Robert Delano, former Niagara County Sheriff Francis Giles, former Niagara County Social Services Commissioner Louis Scozzafava and former Rochester Police Chief Gordon Urlacher. He also prosecuted two men who received sentences of 50 years to life for the murder of two Buffalo priests.

An active member on the Board of Directors of the UB Law Alumni Association, Vacco said he would continue on the board despite his new responsibilities.

“Now I’m going to have the time to come to some meetings,” he joked.

But aside from becoming attorney general, there will be more to keep him busy. In a victory speech at the New York Hilton, Vacco announced some personal good news: His wife, Kelly Anne McIlroy, is pregnant with the couple’s second child. The Vacco family — including their first child, Carmen — will continue to reside in Hamburg, N.Y.

The candidate’s win was a come-from-behind victory on an Election Day full of surprises. His opponent, Karen Burstein, led in polls by as much as 17 percentage points during the campaign. But analysts credited Vacco’s strong showing upstate for his win.

“T’m incredibly proud to say I’m a product of UB Law School,” he said
later. "One of the reasons I won is because of my upstate base.

"If it's true that I'm the first attorney general to be a UB Law grad, it's a humbling distinction for me."

Endorsements from a number of newspapers also helped his campaign. The Buffalo News called Vacco "an aggressive and thorough prosecutor who pursued drug criminals and also was not afraid to take on politically sensitive cases."

Observers also noted that the attorney general race avoided much of the mud-slinging that characterized other campaigns in New York and nationwide, especially the bitter Patoki-Cuomo contest. Vacco refused to make an issue of his opponent's homosexuality, for example, saying that was irrelevant to the office.

An advocate of capital punishment, he promised in his campaign to get the attorney general's office — which in the past has concentrated on consumer protection and environmental lawsuits — more involved in fighting crime. To help victims of crime, he said, he intends to push for creation of a victims' bill of rights and a state office of victim-witness coordinator.

The new attorney general said one of his first priorities will be to work with Patoki to return murderer Thomas Grasso to Oklahoma, where he is scheduled to be executed. Grasso, convicted of murder in Oklahoma, was ordered by Gov. Mario Cuomo to serve out his life sentence in New York before his return to Oklahoma.

In addition, Vacco said he hopes to expand the focus of the state Organized Crime Task Force. "The Mafia is still a critical element in the fight," he said, "but I'd like to see organized crime include other ethnic gangs, street gangs and motorcycle gangs."

PAUL L. FRIEDMAN '68 BECOMES A U.S. DISTRICT JUDGE

After more than 17 years with the Washington, D.C., law firm of White & Case, Paul L. Friedman '68 was sworn into office on Sept. 21, 1994, as a United States District Judge for the District of Columbia.

For six years prior to joining the bench, he served as managing partner of the firm's Washington office. Friedman's practice concentrated in the defense of white-collar crime investigations and prosecutions, including grand jury representation, criminal antitrust cases, defense procurement fraud cases, parallel civil and agency enforcement proceedings and other agency investigations. His civil experience includes general commercial litigation, constitutional litigation, and securities, banking, bankruptcy, insurance and antitrust litigation.

Friedman also maintained an active appellate practice in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, in other federal appellate courts and in the Supreme Court of the United States. In addition, he served as an associate independent counsel for the Iran-Contra Investigation, serving as one of Judge Lawrence Walsh's principal deputies.

A Buffalo native, Friedman is no stranger to the federal court system. Upon graduating cum laude from UB Law, he served as a clerk to Judge Aubrey E. Robinson Jr. of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. One year later, he moved on to the Appellate Division as a clerk for Judge Roger Robb of the U.S. Court of Appeals. His next stop was the Office of the U.S. Attorney, where he served as an Assistant U.S. Attorney and later attained the position of Administrative Assistant U.S. Attorney — the fourth-ranking position in the Office. In 1974 he began a two-year term as Assistant to the Solicitor General of the U.S., during which time he argued five cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1976, Friedman joined White & Case as an associate, becoming a partner three years later.

"Lawyers can make a larger contribution than simply representing individuals and clients," says Friedman, who has actively performed pro bono work and participated in bar activities and the community for over 20 years. He served as president of the District of Columbia Bar, the third-largest state bar in the country, from 1986-87.

"To use a term made famous by Franklin D. Roosevelt, I took advantage of the 'bully pulpit' available to me through this position," he says. Among his accomplishments as bar president, he points to a program that allows volunteer lawyers to assist in registering AIDS victims immigrating to this country. He also helped to create a new model for alternative dispute resolution in the local D.C. courts.

He is most gratified, however, that during his administration he was able to make real progress in aiding the homeless. The Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless, which began as a Bar Association project involving only six to eight people, quickly developed into a nationwide non-profit organization that serves as a model for similar programs across the country. Friedman is a former chair of the American Bar Association (ABA) Commission on Homelessness and Poverty.

Over the past three years, Friedman chaired the U.S. District
Court Civil Justice Reform Act Advisory Group, established under Congressional direction to study cost and delay in the federal courts. The District Court has adopted many of the group’s recommendations for procedural change and improvements in civil litigation. He has found this experience especially rewarding.

“As district court judge I am now involved in the implementation of some of these same recommendations,” he says.

On a local level, Friedman includes his four-and-a-half year term as chair of the District of Columbia Judicial Nomination Commission among the highlights of his career. The commission is responsible for recommending candidates to the President of the United States for appointment to the local District of Columbia courts. During his involvement, 25 of the 60 judicial positions were filled, demonstrating his impact upon the quality of the existing court.

Friedman’s long list of accomplishments and extraordinary efforts in the area of public interest illustrate his commitment to the ongoing enhancement of our legal system. To facilitate this process, he encourages “more lawyers to get involved in activities that improve the life of litigants as well as the courts and the administration of justice as a whole.”

FOUR NAMED TO NEW SUNY HONOR ROLL

Four UB Law alumni were among the first select group named to the 1994 SUNY Alumni Honor Roll, a new awards program celebrating the State University system’s most outstanding alumni.

Hon. M. Dolores Denman ’65, Gerald S. Lippes ’64, Henry J. Nowak ‘61 and Herald Price Fahringrer ’56 were cited as exemplifying one or more of the following attributes: demonstrated support of a SUNY campus or alumni association; outstanding success in his or her profession; and significant contributions to higher education or public service.

The 128 members of the Honor Roll were chosen from among 1.4 million SUNY alumni, from SUNY’s 64 colleges and universities. Those named to the Honor Roll represent the achievements and dedication of the University’s alumni across New York State and the nation.

As a justice in New York’s Eighth Judicial District, Hon. M. Dolores Denman is the first woman named Presiding Justice of one of New York State’s appellate divisions. She chairs both the Judicial Committee on Women in the Courts and the Anti-Bias Committee. Among many honors, she received the 1992 Founder’s Award of the Women’s Bar Association of the State of New York; the 1991 Edwin F. Jaekle Award from the University at Buffalo Law School and UB Law Alumni Association; and the 1994 Capen Award from the University at Buffalo Alumni Association.

Gerald S. Lippes is founder of the law firm of Lippes, Silverstein, Mathias & Wexler, with extensive experience in business and commercial matters. He has served as counsel to numerous private and public companies and financial institutions. He is active in community work that benefits Buffalo hospitals, arts organizations and Jewish philanthropies.

A U.S. Congressman for 18 years, Henry J. Nowak served New York’s 33rd District by matching Buffalo-area needs with available federal aid. He was a member of several Congressional committees, including Public Works and Transportation, and Science, Space and Technology. He was also chairman of the House Subcommittee on Water Resources. Among his many honors, Nowak was named 1993 Western New Yorker of the Year by
One of the most prominent defense attorneys in the nation and a leading Constitutional lawyer, Herald Price Fahringer is a partner in the New York law office of Lipsitz, Green, Fahringer, Roll, Schuller & James. He has taken 14 cases to the United States Supreme Court and won every one. Fahringer is widely published in the area of criminal law. He has received the Distinguished Alumni Award from the UB Law Alumni Association and the Outstanding Practitioner Award from the Criminal Justice Section of the New York State Bar Association.

**UB STUDENT RECEIVES HIGHEST HONOR FROM WHO’S WHO**

"I f you want to become an attorney, you have to set your goals and then be determined to make them happen."

That determination has helped Susan Fox, a third-year UB Law student, survive a chronic disability with optimism and motivation. Recently, she was named the nation’s "Outstanding Law Student of the Year," the highest honored bestowed by Who’s Who Among American Law Students.

At the age of 31, Fox has lived the last 13 years of her life without both kidneys. Diagnosed with kidney disease at the age of 14, she now spends 12 hours each week undergoing hemodialysis treatment.

Her mother, Doris, can remember a time when her daughter’s outlook was not as positive. She told The Opinion, "There was a time when Susan was very sick — so sick we almost lost her. We didn’t think she would live past 20 years old, but here she is at 31, doing fine."

After graduating from Clarence High School in 1981, Fox’s dreams were put on hold indefinitely. Because of her illness, she was forced to withdraw from college in West Virginia after only one week. Throughout the long battle that followed, she managed never to lose sight of her future plans and eventually was able to enroll at Canisius College.

Attributing much of her daughter’s success to her involvement in school, the elder Fox commented, “It seemed the more active she became, the healthier she got.” Filled with determination, she went on to graduate magna cum laude before coming to UB Law School.

This extraordinary drive and commitment is what sparked fellow fraternity members of the Phi Alpha Delta International Legal Fraternity to nominate Fox for the Who’s Who award and led to her selection from over 350 individuals nationwide. The award is based on academic excellence and the ability to overcome adversity.

Surprised by the recognition, Fox said, “I have been doing this so long I don’t really see this as being extraordinary. It seems perfectly natural to me.”

Others would disagree with Fox’s modest depiction of her accomplishments. The members of the Clarence Common Council publicly honored Fox and presented her with a key to the town.

Her classmates have also expressed their admiration. According to Sally Broad, a third-year student and close friend of Fox, “all of us are incredibly proud of her.”

Also a health care professional at the clinic where Fox receives treatment, Broad said that “People who are chronically ill have a tendency to get depressed and to develop a ‘poor me’ attitude. But not Susan Fox — who is known for spreading cheer throughout the clinic with frequent pep talks and genuine care for the other patients. She is an example to others of what can be accomplished in spite of being chronically ill.”

Fox’s community involvement includes over seven years of service on the Board of Directors for the Western New York Chapter of the National Kidney Foundation. In addition, she has worked tirelessly in the area of organ donor registration.

“I’m very concerned that people become more aware of the need for organ donation. Recent changes in the law should make people more inclined to talk to their families about their desire to donate.”

A signature on the back of a driver’s license or donor card does not necessarily mean a donor’s wishes are carried out. Speaking from experience, Fox remains on a waiting list for new kidneys.

Upon graduation, Fox hopes to pursue a career in health care or disability law with a private firm or public interest group. “There are so many people who don’t get the legal representation they need or deserve,” she said.