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The Way We Were: New Oral History Project Preserves Irreplaceable Memories

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Alumni Association:

The way we were

New oral history project
preserves irreplaceable
memories

“**W**hat is your fondest memory of the Law School?”
“Do you believe there is a relationship between academic success in law school and success in the legal profession?”

“What advice do you have for lawyers just beginning their practice?”

“If you could do it all over again, would you choose a legal career?”

They are not easy questions. But those queries and dozens more are at the heart of one of the most ambitious efforts undertaken in years by the UB Law Alumni Association: an oral history project that seeks to preserve the voices and wisdom of accomplished alumni and senior faculty of the school. When complete, the project will consist of hundreds of hours of interviews, stored in the Koren Center of the Law Library and easily searchable using audio indexing.

“We see this as an ongoing, living project that could go on indefinitely if people want it to,” says U.S. Attorney Denise E. O’Donnell, a 1982 Law School alumna who is chair of the project, working with a committee of Law School alumni, faculty and staff.

The project, which was first suggested by attorney Lauren Rachlin in October 1999, was immediately embraced by alumni, Dean R. Nils Olsen Jr. and other faculty and staff members. O’Donnell says its two-year initial phase has included developing a thorough questionnaire for use in interviews, identifying the first individuals to be interviewed, some fund-raising, identifying the necessary technology and planning for preserving the information and a first round of interviews.

The UB Law Alumni Association provided \$2,500 in “seed money” to get the project started.

According to Dean Olsen, “Over the years, as many distinguished members of our Law School family have passed on, we often regretted that their valuable thoughts and feelings about their lives in the law were not recorded for posterity.”

The goal is a collection of voices that could have myriad uses. “These recorded interviews will have an academic use in Law School courses on the legal profession, legal ethics and on the history of legal education. They could also provide primary source material for a future book about the history of the Law School, as a sequel to *Universi-*



ty at Buffalo Law School, 100 Years 1887-1987, co-edited by Robert Schaus and James R. Arnone,” said the dean.

Future historians also could access the tapes for information on the Buffalo legal community, individual practitioners and law professors. The materials could be used for development purposes, promotions and special projects, such as the recent celebration of a century of women at UB Law. They could help in recruiting students, and help alumni maintain and strengthen their connection to their alma mater. Current law students, too, could benefit from a sense of connection with those who have gone before them.

Among those to be interviewed first are retired State Supreme Court Justices Ann T. Mikoll and Matthew J. Jasen; faculty members or emeriti Albert R.



U.S. Attorney Denise
E. O'Donnell '82,
interviews U.S. Dis-
trict Court Judge
John E. Curtin '49.

Mugel, Kenneth F. Joyce, Louis Del Cotto and Jack D. Hyman; the oldest living alumna, Lillian G. Cowan '27; and retired U.S. District Court Judge John T. Curtin '49, whom O'Donnell herself interviewed.

"It was pretty intense to try to do justice to the subject matter of someone that accomplished," O'Donnell reports of her several conversations with Judge Curtin. "A lot of it is trying to focus, listening to what the person has to say, stimulating the person's memory and helping him or her to recall things from the past. One of the eye-openers we had when we began is that oral history is a real science."

The committee turned first to Columbia University Law School, which is doing a similar project (but producing transcripts, not tapes) on its women

alumni and faculty. The UB Law team also had substantial help from Dr. Michael H. Frisch, UB professor of history and American studies, who is an expert in oral history.

"I do not think you have to be a professional to do oral history," says Frisch. "This is something that is within the reach of most of us, as human conversation."

Of the technology involved, Frisch says, "It allows us to return to what oral history is all about, which is the oral record. Transcribing is at best a kind of crude approximation of what is there.

"This tape system treats the sound itself as the material for a database. It digitizes the sound, and you can then identify passages and give those passages keywords."

By digitally coding the subject mat-

ter — a digital marker can be placed, for example, at every mention of the old Law School building on West Eagle Street — users can then zero in on those mentions using a search function and you can find any passage in your entire archive that you have identified.

"If you want to hear what Judge Curtin had to say about the old Law School at 111 W. Eagle St., for example, you can," O'Donnell says. "Or you can hear what everyone said about the old law school, or you can hear the whole interview if you want to.

"It is a time-consuming and multi-faceted project," O'Donnell says, "but it will collect and preserve historical material that will be of enormous value to the Law School and the community."