To Russia with Hope: Catherine Cerulli '92 Honored for U.S.A/Russia Legal Program and Other Work

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Faculty

To Russia with hope

Catherine Cerulli '92 honored for U.S.-Russia legal program and other work

It is not easy to sum up Catherine Cerulli '92 in a phrase. It takes a few of them. Director of research for UB Law School's Family Violence Clinic, which she co-founded, creator of a model domestic-violence prevention program that is now used throughout Western New York.

Co-founder with her husband, attorney Christopher Thomas, of a Rochester-based program called Legal Links that creates partnerships between U.S. and Russian legal professionals.

An adjunct professor of psychiatry at the University of Rochester.

Writing her dissertation for a Ph.D. from SUNY Albany in criminal justice.

It is precisely that diversity and energy that has led the New York State Bar Association to honor Cerulli as its 2001 Outstanding Young Lawyer of the Year. The award, given annually "to recognize the contribution of a New York State attorney admitted to practice less than 10 years who has made a significant contribution to the betterment of the community and the legal profession," was presented at the bar association's annual meeting in New York City on Jan. 24, 2001.

"I appreciate the fact that the bar association is recognizing the work of attorneys in the field of domestic violence," Cerulli said, "and also the work of part-timers. It shows me that work that focuses primarily on women and that is being done by a part-time team, is valued."

It was while she was a first-year UB Law School student that Cerulli and classmate Suzanne Tomkins established the school's Domestic Violence Task Force, which since has gained clinic status. Cerulli took that experience and that interest with her upon graduation to Rochester, where she worked as an assistant district attorney from 1993 to 1996. It was there that she established the SAFE program, for Stop Abuse in the Family Environment. It brings the targets of domestic violence into the district attorney's office on a weekly basis to provide support and information about the legal process.

The goal is to help ensure that the target will follow through with the prosecution. "There is heavy victim contact, and it makes the system work," Cerulli said. The program has since been replicated in other jurisdictions in Western New York.

After beginning graduate study at SUNY Albany, Cerulli saw her legal interests take an international turn when she and her husband, who was working with the American Bar Association, founded Legal Links, which receives funding from the ABA and other sources. The program seeks to help Russians to advance the rule of law by creating formal and informal partnerships between American and Russian lawyers and other legal professionals.

The program began with two projects linking professionals in Rochester and its Russian sister city, Novgorod, on the issue of newly enacted laws regarding land registration and enforcement.
Gerulli visited Novgorod and found that it had no system of child protective services, very few shelters for battered women and no treatment options for batterers. Working with a translator, she and other Legal Links members are now organizing a conference in Russia on the issue of domestic violence.

of civil judgments. Now in its fourth year, Legal Links has extended its reach to address domestic violence, which Gerulli notes happens at similar rates in Russia as in the United States, but with one difference: In Russia, domestic violence more often leads to murder.

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Through UB Law School's Family Violence Clinic, Gerulli and others have been researching issues in how the legal system handles domestic violence cases. One recent project — "our most important project to date," she said — involved interviewing 147 women and men who were petitioners to Family Court in Monroe County, in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the special domestic violence part of that court.

"As a result," she said, "the court has implemented some of the recommendations that the petitioners made."

"It is a rare person who can transform despair into hope. Yet it is hope that embodies the good of the people. As Roman orator Cicero once said, 'The good of the people is the greatest law.' Catherine's devotion to the greatest law makes us all proud and prosperous while making her a deserving recipient," said Buffalo attorney Robert E. Gallagher, chair of the committee conferring the bar association award.

Gerulli also serves on the Rochester Police Department's Police Chief's Pre-Citizen Interaction Committee, which studies how police and the community can reduce Rochester's homicide rate.