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New Courtroom Named for Francis M. Letro '79

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Campaign for UB Law

New courtroom named for Francis M. Letro '79

Law School's first \$1 million gift



"I was an ordinary kid who was given an extraordinary opportunity."

When Francis M. Letro was accepted to UB Law School, he acknowledges that the school took a chance on him. "I was an ordinary kid who was given an extraordinary opportunity," says the successful Buffalo trial lawyer. Letro has now decided to return the favor in dramatic fashion. He has committed \$1 million to the Campaign for UB Law to provide major funding for the new courtroom project. Thanks to his generosity, judges, juries and lawyers will be pursuing justice for years to come in the Francis M. Letro Courtroom in O'Brian Hall.

"This gift will have an enormous impact on the quality of the Law School," says Dean Nils Olsen. "We are deeply appreciative to Francis and his wife, Cindy, for helping us to bring the courts into UB Law School."

"I was a non-traditional student," Letro recalls during a conversation in his office on the 10th floor of downtown Buffalo's Dun Building, a framed copy of his UB Law diploma directly behind his orderly desk. "There were no lawyers, no UB graduates, no judges in my family. I had no contacts in Buffalo at all."

What he had was a desire to use the law to change people's lives for the better — a desire born from his own family's tragedy. Letro's father, a foreman for the Erie-Lackawanna Railroad, lost a leg in a railroad accident when Francis, the youngest of three children, was 7. His mother had to go to work to help support the family; his sister had to leave nursing school. But the case that compensated his father for his injury made a big impression on the youngster.

"I remember how my father had great respect and admiration for the lawyer who handled his case," Letro says. "Every Christmas we used to take some present over to him, something homemade."

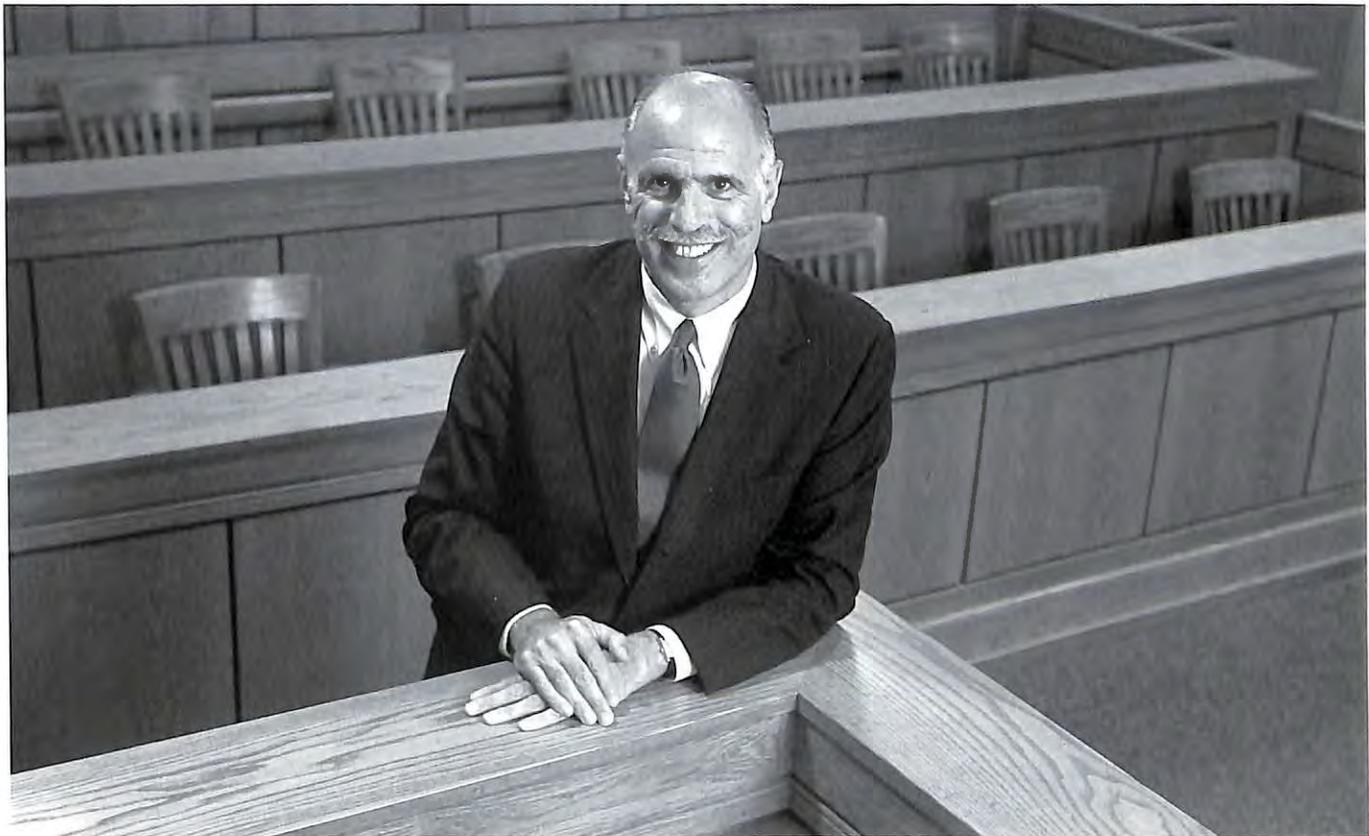
"My life has really been affected by advocacy, and it is that sense of advocacy that I got from UB. That is what we try to do on a day-to-day basis, advocate for the little guy."

Letro came from Olean, "a small town, where I was an average student. I felt fortunate to get into law school. UB looked beyond the GPA and the LSAT scores for certain qualities. There was an essay component to the application, so that might have made the difference. But they took a chance on me, they really did."

He arrived in Buffalo in 1972, just past the crest of the civil rights movement and just as the Watergate scandal was heating up. But despite the prominence of crusading lawyers in American society at the time, Letro had a few doubts as he slogged through the workload that a high-quality legal education entails. Was this really how he wanted to spend his professional life?

Law Professor William R. Greiner — now UB president — made all the difference.

"President Greiner made it a point to get to know me," Letro says. "I would consider him my mentor in law school — my academic and my spiritual adviser. He gave me a little tough love, too. He encouraged me to get involved in the school's clinic, working with Neighborhood Legal Services, and when I



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graduated, he recommended me for my first legal job.

“I was the first law student in my class to get up and make a presentation in New York Supreme Court. That gave me a real understanding of the possibilities. I gained a whole different perspective on law school at that point.

“That is the thing about UB Law School — it really has a social and a political consciousness. That became obvious to me. I really saw that you can make a difference. They encourage you to go out into the community and use those skills to effectuate change. You can use these skills and these abstract ideas and these concepts to change people’s lives.”

The timing of his law school career was fortuitous as well, Letro says. His

first year was the school’s last year at 77 W. Eagle St., and as a young law student, he joined with others in crossing the street to the county courthouse to watch some of Buffalo’s most legendary trial lawyers at work.

“We would spend the time between classes going to watch the attorneys in action,” Letro says. “It was great being downtown. We would even talk to the lawyers in the halls. I remember seeing one lawyer pacing in the hall there, because the jury was out, and he told me how nerve-racking it was to be waiting for the verdict. I very much enjoyed that kind of conversation. When I think back about going to law school, I think about watching trials and seeing lawyers in action.

“It became evident on the new campus that we had lost the advantage of seeing day-to-day trials. And when I was approached about contributing to the courtroom project, I thought, here

is a way of bringing the legal community to the Law School.

“I had thought about doing something sometime for the Law School, and this seemed like a perfect opportunity.”

With the support and encouragement of his wife, Cindy Abbott, Letro hopes his action will encourage others to support the school’s ongoing projects.

“To the extent that I can encourage other graduates to contribute to the Law School,” he says, “that is all to the good.”