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Court Is in Session: UB Law's New Courtroom Hosts Its First Trials

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Campaign for UB Law

Court is in session

UB Law's new courtroom hosts its first trials



K.C. KRATT

Left to right, Hon. Ralph A. Boniello III '69, Hon. Ronald H. Tills '59, Hon. Barbara Howe '80 and Hon. John T. Curtin '49 seated in the jury box.

istrate Judge Hugh B. Scott alleging excessive force by law enforcement officials in Genesee County – ended in a mistrial after jurors found themselves deadlocked. Many students watched parts of that trial.

Justice Vincent E. Doyle Jr., administrative judge for the 8th Judicial District of the New York State Supreme Court, said that while logistical factors may come into play, he hopes the judges under his supervision will make full use of the facility. He noted that renovation work on the downtown courthouse may work in UB Law's favor.

"At least certainly for the next 32 months, we are going to be hard-pressed because of the renovation project to find space that is quiet, that will not have construction going on around it which will inconvenience people's access into and out of the courtroom," Doyle said. "To have space available like the Law School's courtroom is going to be a benefit to us, and to the Law School."

Doyle said commercial and matrimonial parts that do not require the presence of juries may be easier to schedule in Amherst, but added that jury trials of all sorts could be situated there. He suggested that, while jury selection still would have to take place downtown, once a jury is empaneled and jurors are asked about their transportation needs, it may be just as convenient to hear some cases in O'Brian Hall as downtown.

"I have asked a couple of the judges to keep in mind the availability of that courtroom for cases that can be heard at UB that do not inconvenience great numbers of people, including jurors and/or witnesses," Doyle said. "I am assured by judges that they are doing that and do intend from time to time to utilize the courtroom as the opportunity presents itself."

Another recent use of the courtroom was by Appellate Division Justice Jerome

If jurisprudence is a spectator sport – and truth be told, for lawyers and legal junkies, sometimes it is – then UB Law School students now have front-row seats. The Law School's long-awaited courtroom facilities on the first floor of John Lord O'Brian Hall opened for official court proceedings last fall, affording students, as well as faculty, staff and the public, the opportunity to watch appellate division and U.S. magistrate's court in action. Not since the Law School moved to Amherst from its old location in downtown Buffalo have observers had such ready access to the business of the judiciary. The new courtroom, recently named the Francis M. Letro Courtroom, is unique among U.S. law schools – the only fully functional court housed on a university campus.

"This will be an extraordinary educational opportunity for students," Dean Nils Olsen said at opening ceremonies for the facility. In addition, he said, "we are using this teaching opportunity to leverage a great deal of public service. Our University truly benefits the community when public service is the product of our teaching and scholarship."

The project, funded through substantial alumni contributions, the University provost's office, and state support includes two 85-seat lecture halls and three small classrooms, in addition to judge's chambers, a jury deliberation room, a technology support room and seating for up to 100

spectators. Overall, it totals 11,700 square feet. The entire facility was installed in a two-story space formerly occupied by a large lecture hall. Designed in the Arts & Crafts style with beautiful oak paneling, it is a triumph of design as well as functionality. Design was by Foit-Albert and Associates.

Despite its classical appearance, the new courtroom incorporates state-of-the-art technology, including computer facilities for all trial participants and the capability of closed-circuit broadcasting.

Details of exactly how the state court system will use the courtroom continue to be worked out. In an ironic twist, the facility's first jury trial – a case before U.S. Mag-



Clockwise from top left: Terrence M. Connors '71, a special donor for whom the jury deliberation room was named.

Hon. Eugene F. Pigott Jr. '73 meets the press.

Norman J. Pecora '31, a special donor for whom the judge's chambers are named.

UB President William R. Greiner; Dean Nils Olsen receives a plaque from the Appellate Division – Fourth Department, presented by presiding justice Hon. Eugene F. Pigott Jr. '73; Hon. Vincent E. Doyle Jr '56.

C. Gorski, who brought his New York State Pattern Jury Committee to the facility in late July as they worked on revising the state's Model Pattern Jury Instructions to reflect recent changes in the law.

Said UB President William R. Greiner: "As the first and only full-service courtroom in the nation to occupy a law school, the new UB Law courtroom takes university partnerships with local communities to an unprecedented level. This courtroom will be a tremendous boon to both UB Law School and to the Western New York legal community, whose support for this project has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic. The state-of-the-art technology, combined with daily trial and appellate proceedings, will place UB Law School in a unique position in legal education."

Vice Dean George Kannar, who oversaw design and construction of the project, said, "The UB Law courtroom will provide students with a unique opportunity to gain hands-on insight into the judicial process, from the very first day of their legal education. It is an opportunity for UB Law students to take what they are learning in the

classroom and to see those lessons applied in practice, in a full-fledged working courtroom located just across the hall."

On the design of the facility, Kannar said, "We wanted the courtroom to be consistent with Western New York traditions, and the Roycroft style of furniture is something people associate with Western New York. We chose oak paneling and furniture that match the original student lockers in O'Brien Hall to give a consistent sense of design."

In addition to the lead gift from Francis M. Letro '79, major contributions were received from alumni donors to help build the new courtroom facility. They included Norman Pecora '31, for whom the new judge's chambers are named. "I do not donate because I feel that I am obligated, but because my heart made me," Pecora said. "This is a matter of redeeming, to give back part of what the school gave to me."

Said trial attorney Terrence M. Connors '71, a special donor for whom the jury deliberation room was named: "A courtroom

like this distinguishes our already distinguished Law School. It sets us apart from other law schools because it is such a wonderful blend of the academic and the practical. It allows students to display their academic knowledge in a practical setting, and there is no substitute for that in a learning environment."

Connors said such issues as "where to stand, how to approach a witness, how to invade the jury's personal space – now it is all set out in a room, almost like a laboratory that allows students to 'successfully fail' without jeopardizing any client's rights. For me, that was a tremendous project that I wholeheartedly supported. With others, I did what I could to make this a reality."

In keeping with the overall feeling, four photographs by Western New York photographer John Pfahl have been mounted in the judge's chambers. UB's Anderson Gallery has generously lent other original works of art for the jury deliberation room.

Said Dean Olsen of the ambitious project: "This is a brave experiment. I am quite sure it will be a great success."