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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


Fifteen years ago, the Genesee County grand jury was able to work its way through a number of cases that impacted the community through the Genesee County Courtroom. In the future, new county courtroom opportunities will be available 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 65-seat lecture halls and three small classrooms, in addition to judge's chambers, a jury delibration 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-
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’Brian Hall to give a consistent sense of design.”

In addition to the lead gift from Francis M. Leeto ’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 be successful in this field 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 Pahl 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.”