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Oral History Makes History: Digital Project Is First of Its Kind

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Alumni Association

Oral history makes history

Digital project is first of its kind

- Hon. John T. Curtin '49 on his favorite Law School course—torts.
- Herald Price Fabringer '56 on coaching a team to the state moot court championship.
- Lillian E. Cowan '27 saying, "If you want to be a lawyer, you have to care about people."
- Hon. Matthew J. Jasen '39 on working at the post office after classes ended for the day.

Those tidbits of UB Law School history – and thousands more – have become part of a treasure trove of information that is being compiled in a revolutionary oral history project coming close to fruition. The first-of-its-kind project involves interviewing alumni, faculty members and others with close ties to UB Law, preserving their voices for posterity, and digitally indexing their words to provide easy access for historians, researchers and others.

"This project adds another dimension to the chronicle of our Law School's history," said Ilene R. Fleischmann, associate dean for alumni and communications, and executive director of the UB Law Alumni Association. "It is a resource we have never had before.

"With the help of our faculty we will be developing an intellectual history of the Law School, and we will get a

much more detailed understanding of our alumni – who they are, what they did and what they believed in."

Fleischmann says the digitized medium in which the interviews are being preserved has a quality that no written page can match. "It is very immediate and very accessible," she said.

Lynn A. Clarke '83, new president of the UB Law Alumni Association, has chaired the project since taking over that job from Denise E. O'Donnell '82. Clarke says 10 interviews have been conducted and processed, with more to come.

"It really makes history come alive," she said. "People think of history projects as dusty archives and long transcripts. This is 180 degrees from that type of concept. It is just incredible, for example, to hear Judge Curtin in his own words talking about some of the cases he worked on."

Clarke said the particular value of the innovative medium of digitizing the interviews is that they are thoroughly indexed. A user will be able to, for example, enter a keyword such as "77 W. Eagle St." and have immediate access to every interviewee's reminiscences of the Law School's old home. "That is what makes this cutting-edge and really user-friendly," she said.

She hopes to have the project in its first usable form within a year to 18 months. "We want to have a dedicated

spot in the Law School for all who want to use it, whether they are law students or researchers or the general public. We are trying to design an area that will have information, photographs and other material regarding all the people on the tapes that you can listen to.

And, she said, this UB Law School history will be a never-ending story. "It will be ongoing probably forever," Clarke said. "It is documenting the accomplishments and careers and lives of distinguished alumni and professors and deans, and we will continue to have those kinds of people for a long time to come."

Judith Weiland, a master's degree candidate in history at UB, has been doing the tedious work of digitally indexing the 10 completed interviews.

"In some ways, we are making history," Weiland said. "Most oral histories are transcribed and lightly indexed, if at all. You end up doing a lot of stopping the tape and fast-forwarding. This process saves you that step. It takes you right to the sound bite that you want. It can even be imported into a PowerPoint presentation."

She said the software has been modified from a program originally developed for industrial market research.

Overseeing the project's technical and developmental aspects is Michael H. Frisch, a professor of history/senior research scholar in UB's history department. "This history involves multiple interviews with many different people, and it will be used for a lot of different purposes," he said. "It is like indexing a book. The questions are, what would people be interested in and what is the best way to frame this idea?"

"I think this model that we have im-



Hon. Leslie G. Foschio '65 interviews Hon. Matthew J. Jasen '39.

provided with the UB Law School project will be a model for a new kind of institutional oral history. To me, it is a really interesting breakthrough. In conventional terms, there has always been a kind of distance between the archive and the user. The archivist wants to protect things; the user wants to get his grubby hands on them. One of the really liberating things about digital approaches is that it allows both of those things at the same time."

Alumni and other UB Law-connected people have volunteered to do the interviews, and they report that the experience is a fascinating one.

"A well-trained lawyer is trained to respond to any task or challenge that is handed to you. Particularly when it comes to gleaning facts on the basis of asking questions, that is what lawyers are especially trained to do," said Hon. Leslie G. Foschio '65, who interviewed Hon. Matthew J. Jasen '39 for the project.

Of his subject, Foschio said: "I marveled at his tremendous sense of grass-roots political ability, his perseverance in preparing himself over years to make that run for State Supreme Court, as a Democrat, successfully. It was really quite an accomplishment. And I admired his skill in developing his career on his own as a trial lawyer and prominent figure in the community.

"It was like a telescope in time, to look back in that way and through his experience what it was like for him, and subsequently relive his career through the interview."

New York State Supreme Court Justice Barbara Howe '80, of the 8th Judicial District, interviewed famed First Amendment attorney Herald Price Fahringer Jr. '56 in his East Side Manhattan office.

"I learned more about Herald Price Fahringer from that time, more about him as a person as well as his claims to fame as a First Amendment attorney and advocate," said Howe, who was a history major as an undergraduate.

"For example, I learned of his absolute and singular dedication to the profession and practice of law. I mean singular. He did not try to paint himself as the all-around civic citizen. He knows who he has been, is and wants to be, which is the totally prepared and dedicated advocate for his client.

"What was interesting, too, was how he had gotten into the computer age in terms of using word processing for his appellate drafting, even though that was something that many of his generation have bypassed learning. He was also an extremely gracious person. I found him forthcoming in describing his Law School experience, and his endeavors between undergraduate school and law school, which in his case meant that when he went to law school, he really knew why he was there."

The project is being funded by the Law Alumni Association and the Law School with additional funding from Lauren Rachlin in memory of his father, Harry Rachlin '26.