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Bradford '53 honored for distinguished service by the Buffalo Law Review

Left to right: John P. Longobardo '03, Hilary P. Bradford '53 and Dean Nils Olsen

By Nicole Peradotto

In 1950, the UB Law School was located at 77 West Eagle St. Tuition cost $450 a year. And first-year student Hilary P. Bradford didn't know what had hit him.

"I was totally unprepared for the study of chaos theory that is the law, with its precedents ricocheting and colliding around the universe," Bradford recalled at the 14th Annual Buffalo Law Review Dinner. "It really didn't make much sense to me."

During a heartfelt and humorous address, Bradford reminisced about his memorable days at UB and his rewarding career in the legal profession. The dinner, which took place March 28 at the Twentieth Century Club, was held to honor the longtime lawyer for his distinguished service to Western New York and his alma mater, as well as to celebrate the Buffalo Law Review in its 51st year of existence.

For his part, Bradford served as the publication's third editor-in-chief — a title, he told fellow dinner guests, that he never downplayed.

"I was inordinately proud of that fact," he said with a smile. "It took a long time for me to realize that I was just another guy, and that I would not always be the editor-in-chief of the Buffalo Law Review. This award brings back very warm memories of my years at the Law School."

Bradford, currently of counsel for the Rochester-based firm Underberg and Kessler, admitted that he felt undeserving of the Law Review's distinguished service award. Yet faculty and staff described him as the ideal candidate.

"Hilary Bradford is among the most intellectually gifted and accomplished attorneys to graduate from our law school," said Dean Nils Olsen. "He also is one of our most generous and supportive alumni, and he well deserves this prestigious award."

Bradford's resume also speaks to his good deeds at UB and in the community. As one of 10 alumni to serve on the steering committee of the Campaign for UB Law School, he provides guidance in the planning and shaping of the school's $12 million capital campaign. In 1995 he endowed the Jacob D. Hyman Scholarship, which financially assists students who have demonstrated exceptional character and who possess a strong commitment to professional and community service.

Currently a member of the Dean's Advisory Council, he has been instrumental in planning a number of the Law School's annual events. He also serves on several charitable trusts and foundations in the region, including the Presbyterian of Western New York, for which he is a trustee.

His hands may be full now, but back in 1950, Bradford confessed, he felt overwhelmed by law school.

"I found it very difficult. As an undergraduate, I had very few instructors who expected me to think for myself or to do anything that was creative, original or different. It was all a matter of memorizing, repeating and giving it back to the guy. And I really thought the study of law was going to be like that."

At the end of his third year, Bradford accepted an offer to serve as the confidential law assistant to the Fourth Department Appellate Division in Rochester, where he remained until 1957. It was, as he recalled, an "unbelievable job with an unbelievable salary" — $7,200 a year.

"You have to understand that a typical deal for a UB graduate at that time was $50 a week. It was $50 a week and 50 percent of your own business, which came to exactly zero. And here I was making $7,200 a year. I could not believe my good fortune."

Bradford's first job offered him a wealth of legal experience. But he also valued it for its perks, he told his audience — and he wasn't referring to health insurance or paid vacations.

"Once a week everyone went to the bar at the Hotel Powers to watch the Gillette Wednesday Night Fights. That was an opportunity to observe judicial behavior that you didn't normally get a chance to observe, and to hear judicial language that typically wouldn't find its way into a published opinion."

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For all the diversion the fight nights provided, they didn't offer young bachelors like Bradford an opportunity to socialize with the opposite sex. At an outing sponsored by the YMCA, however, he did strike up a conversation with "a very pretty English girl" named Beryl Hutchby.

Too shy to ask for her phone number, Bradford found a less direct way to get what he wanted. "The lawyer in me took over. I thought, 'She's an alien. She has to be registered. The INS surely will have her address and phone number.'"

So he called a friend in the U.S. Attorney's Office and asked him to release the confidential information. Although his acquaintance initially balked at the request, when Bradford explained the romantic nature of the appeal, the man agreed. "I placed the call," Bradford said, "and I'm very glad I did."

Shortly after marrying Hutchby, Bradford joined the four-lawyer Buffalo firm that would eventually bear his name: Cohen, Swados, Wright, Hanfin, Bradford and Brett.

The first major work he handled for the firm, he remembered, also stands out as one of the most dispassionate moments in his legal career. It involved attending a public zoning hearing to consider whether the firm's client, the WGR Corporation, could build a signal tower in the town of Wales.

"I knew we were going to be questioned about safety and was I ever right," he recalled.

"Residents were worried that low-flying aircraft would fly into (the signal tower), and that it would blow down in the wintry time. So I took with me the station engineer, and said -- and it was one of my worst decisions as a lawyer -- 'I put myself in your hands, Carl. Talk to these good people about safety."

"As it turned out, the engineer did little to appease residents' concerns. "He went up to the microphone," Bradford recalled, "and these were his exact words, frozen in my mind for 50 years":

"I want to assure you good people that we're very concerned about safety. Why, that little girl who was electrocuted at WBUF was one in a million."

"Now, no one had said a single word about a little girl being electrocuted. What to do? I had just called him up there; I couldn't very well chase him off; so I let him go on.

"Obviously, it couldn't have gotten any worse, but I didn't get any better. WGR did not build a tower in the town of Wales, and I realized that I had fallen on my head."

That early misstep notwithstanding, Bradford went on to a luminous career with the firm. During his 44 years there, he concentrated his practice in commercial litigation and appellate work and argued a number of cases before the Second Circuit of the U.S. Court of Appeals.

"I always felt that a well-written brief -- and I was never satisfied with mine -- necessarily followed by a well-delivered argument was the best advertising a law firm could expose itself to in a time when law firms didn't advertise.

Four years ago, Bradford "semi-retired" from the law, trimming his workload so he could pursue other passions, such as fishing on the Genesee River. "I would do it all over in a heartbeat," he concluded. "I wish I could start over again with you guys," he told the students in the audience.

Following tradition, the evening ended with the presentation of awards. Outgoing Buffalo Law Review executive editor John Longobardo received the Carlos Alden Award for his dedication to the publication. The Philip Halpern Award, for the best article published in the Law Review, went to J. Michael Lennon for "The Law of Collision and the U.S. Navy."

Associate Publications Awards went to Shannon Farley for "Neonaticide: When the Bough Breaks and the Cradle Falls;" Michael Pastrick for "When a Day at the Ballpark Tums a Can of Corn into a Can of Worms: Popov v. Hayashi;" Elizabeth Perry for "Why Fear the Fungus? Why Toxic Mold Is and Isn't the Next Big Toxic Tort;" and Jessica Wiltsie for "An Investor State Mechanism in the Free Trade Area of the Americas: Lessons From NAFTA Chapter 11."

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