Catching Up: Two Emeritus Professors Talk About the Law and Their Lives After UB Law
Faculty

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Catching up

Two emeritus professors talk about the law and their lives after UB Law

Their teaching careers at UB Law School are behind them now, but their former students’ fondness for some revered professors lives on.

UB Law Forum recently caught up with two professors whose teaching has been a bedrock of the legal education of a generation of lawyers.

Professor Milton Kaplan taught full time for two decades at the Law School, from 1965 to 1985, and contributed as an emeritus professor for seven years following his retirement. He also served as co-director of the New York Sea Grant Law Program and edited the Sea Grant Law Journal from 1976 to 1984.

Students will remember his expertise in municipal and constitutional law. A new $100 prize for a graduating senior showing excellence in the policy field, endowed by James L. Magavera ’60, his former law partner, was awarded in Kaplan’s name for the first time at Commencement 2003. Kaplan himself was the presenter.

Kaplan resides in an assisted-living facility in Amherst not far from the UB campus, where he moved after he stopped teaching altogether in 2002. His well-appointed apartment is decorated with Chagall and Jackson Pollock prints, a bookshelf full of thrillers, and a new stereo and computer – the latter an innovation he says he is still getting used to.

Kaplan recalls with satisfaction the “simulated law firm” that he and SUNY Distinguished Service Professor Thomas E. Heacock created as part of a first-year course in municipal and environmental law. Innovation in teaching is a point of pride with him.

“We are supposed to instruct students in how to think like lawyers,” he says. “When I came on board, I never asked myself, ‘How do I go about it?’ I knew how I would not go about it, which was to study appellate cases. There are a number of ways to get to the basics without that.”

Kaplan says the Law School now makes great use of such non-traditional teaching methods, and “over a period of three years in law school, students are going to get exposure to and experience in all of them. Students now have a much wider range of offerings in particular areas and can learn by practicing law in many excellent clinical programs.”

He also salutes the use of adjunct faculty, most of whom are practitioners in the legal community. “At the beginning of the new era in teaching,” Kaplan says, “if you had one part-time teaching a clinical course, that was it. The broadening came about through the efforts of the deans.”

Kaplan points to the “serendipity” that brought him to UB Law School in 1965, and that same circumstance, he says, led him through a long legal career that included work in Calcutta, in Greece and among the Navajo tribes of the American West. “The whole horizon broadened of who I knew and the people who knew me,” he says, “That led to some interesting opportunities.”

He sees some trends in the legal profession he dislikes, specifically the move toward wider advertising of legal services. “It has gotten out of hand,” he says, “I find it offensive, like bragging. But apparently, advertising has worked.”

His wife, Linda S. Reynolds, “an outstanding lawyer” who headed the Legal
Aid Bureau, died in 1999, a loss that he still feels keenly. But his daughter, deputy director of the Erie County Industrial Development Agency, lives nearby, and he is in touch with his son, who works in computer graphics in California.

Asked for any advice he would give current students, Kaplan said, "Given their interests in the municipal law field, or more accurately state and local government law, I suggest that they take whatever courses are open to them to learn and/or apply knowledge in the field. I would strongly advise them to take advantage of those opportunities."

Professor Virginia Leary ended her UB Law School career as a SUNY Distinguished Service Professor, known worldwide for her work in human rights law. She now lives in the center of international human rights work: Geneva, Switzerland, where she graciously consented to answer some questions by e-mail. The following are some excerpts from those responses:

"Geneva is unique—it is about 40 percent non-Swiss. It is the center of international organizations, so that you meet people from all over the world, and interesting meetings—especially on human rights—go on here. It is a small city—only about 400,000 people—and is very beautiful, surrounded by mountains. I live right across from a park and five minutes from a beautiful lakefront. The city is easy to get around in—for example, when I go to the airport I can park right next to the entrance. For a small city, however, the traffic is terrible.

"I absolutely love living here. I am near very good libraries—five minutes from the library of the Graduate Institute of International Studies, near the UN library, etc. My friends come from all over the world, and it is easy to travel around to see people. I can walk to almost every place in the city.

"My days now are spent following UN meetings, meeting friends in academia and the UN and visitors to the many meetings here—reading, eating at the nice restaurants here, walking in parks and in the countryside. I have slowed down on writing and attending meetings outside of Geneva, but am still active in the International Council on Human Rights Policy here in Geneva. In addition, I have a Ford Foundation grant to study how labor rights are being examined at international organizations (ILO, OECD, the European Union and the World Trade Organization).

"I like knowing people from many different nationalities and seeing my own country from the perspective of others. As you can imagine, the U.S. is highly criticized these days in Europe because of its actions in Iraq and elsewhere. I do not defend these U.S. actions, because in many cases I do not agree with them, but it does require an ability to accept criticism of one's own country and to try to understand the point of view of others—something we should always do.

"I have many contacts at the UN, and I have continued to be involved in various professional activities. For example, I was asked by the UN Human Rights Program to do an evaluation of their center in Cambodia. I spent two weeks in Cambodia several years ago, with two other persons, evaluating UN efforts to protect human rights there.

"In addition, I went back to teaching! Hastings College of the Law of the University of California in San Francisco asked me to become the Fromm Professor of International and Comparative Law—a post that meant one semester a year teaching in San Francisco. Since I have a sister living in San Francisco and San Francisco is a very nice city—and I missed teaching—I accepted. From 1998 to 2001, I taught one semester a year in San Francisco. I finally gave it up, as commuting back and forth each year from Geneva was too difficult. I settled here in Geneva for the full year in 2002.

"It is difficult not to be teaching any longer. I miss students and being with colleagues. I have always found the academic life wonderful—one of the best ways one can earn a living. But it is more than a way of earning a living—it is an interesting, challenging and fruitful way to spend one's life—even sometimes we do not think so as we are correcting papers! I especially miss not having an office now. My papers and books are scattered all over the house.

"On the other hand, while I miss teaching, at my age (76) it is time to slow down. Teaching even part time is demanding, so I am quite happy with my present life. I have had writing commitments and was at Stanford University last year for a symposium on labor rights. My talk there is coming out in a published volume in a few months. I have also had another publication on labor rights of migrants just published.

"My days now are spent largely visiting with friends, enjoying the outdoor life around Geneva (hiking, walking, countryside, restaurants), following UN activities and writing obligations. I have recently had some health problems also that have slowed me down.

"I miss colleagues at UB and Hastings Law School and am very glad that I will be coming back to UB for a conference organized at the Baldy Center in October on human rights. UB Law School is truly a unique place with its emphasis on uniting other disciplines with the law and its sense of freedom to experiment with new ways of teaching and writing. My strongest memories of my time at the Law School are the opportunity to be in an environment which was not stodgy, which was open to new ways of approaching the study of law and which gave great freedom to the professors to find new means of teaching and researching in the field of law.

"I think very highly of UB Law School and its willingness over the years to accept new approaches to the law and to be willing to be experimental. I think it fills a unique role in American law schools because of that."