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A new voice for Africa
Nicole Lee ’02 takes the helm at TransAfrica Forum

The nation’s oldest African-American advocacy organization for justice in Africa and the Diaspora has a new chief officer who is a UB Law School graduate.

Nicole Lee ’02 became executive director of TransAfrica Forum in mid-December. Her appointment was announced by actor Danny Glover, chairman of TransAfrica Forum’s board. She had previously served as operations director of the Washington, D.C.-based organization.

Lee is the first woman to head the 30-year-old organization.

“I do not recall across the Law School any student who has achieved something like this,” said Professor Makau Mutua, with whom Lee worked closely in the Law School as she pursued an international law concentration. “It is really a meteoric rise.”

As executive director, Lee will oversee the organization’s human rights and advocacy work relating to Africa and other worldwide locations where people of African descent have settled in large numbers, including Europe, the Caribbean and South America. She is also responsible for administration, fundraising and financial management.

Largely, she said, TransAfrica Forum takes its lead from the populations whose causes it seeks to advance. “We do not speak for them,” she said, “but as we move forward as a constituent organization in the United States, we need to ensure that we amplify the voices of the Diaspora and international civil society here in the U.S.”

Lee credits her predecessors in the job – Randall Robinson, who spearheaded the anti-apartheid movement in the United States, and Bill Fletcher – with setting forth “strong visions of pan-Africanism, and how to position the organization in the United States, we need to ensure that we amplify the voices of the Diaspora and international civil society here in the U.S.”

Lee said. “In my final year at UB Law, Mutua named me an international law fellow. In that capacity, she worked with him in running the school’s Human Rights Center, organizing conferences and internships, and bringing in speakers. She also worked for a time at a Legal Aid firm in Capetown, South Africa. All of this, she said, was helpful in ‘articulating what you really believe.’ At some point you have to stop merely being a sponge and articulate what you really believe.”

Following her Law School graduation, she worked with a human rights law firm in Haiti, traveling often to Washington, D.C., to advocate on issues involving public health care in Haiti. Following a February 2004 coup in Haiti, she ended up in D.C. full time, and joined TransAfrica Forum early in 2005.

Now she is managing a paid staff of eight or nine people, augmented by about 50 active volunteers and a “very active and high profile board,” which in addition to Glover includes actor-singer Harry Belafonte.

She remains a booster of UB Law School, its effect on her professional life and its future. “The biggest advantage of going to UB,” she said, “was that I had very progressive professors. The university is one of the only places where you can question our society and how our society functions in a way that is fairly constructive.”

And as she looks to the Law School’s future, not surprisingly she sees great promise in its human rights program. “In terms of creating a Law School that is top-notch,” Lee said, “we need to put our energy behind the Human Rights Center and the international law program that Mutua is creating. That program has a vision. It is going to be that vision that will take the Law School to the next level.”