4-1-2012

A Return, with Portfolio: New Associate Professor Michael Boucai Has A Childhood Connection to Buffalo

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A return, with portfolio

New associate professor Michael Boucai has a childhood connection to Buffalo

As a child, Michael Boucai traveled every summer from Long Island to Buffalo to visit his maternal parents, immigrants from eastern Europe. “I always had a lot of fun,” he says. One attraction: the dinosaur bones at the Museum of Science.

Now Boucai is returning for good as he joins the SUNY Buffalo Law School faculty this fall. He will teach criminal law and sexuality law. His research focuses on the latter. Boucai’s scholarship explores how the law treats various forms of sexuality and intimacy, and how this treatment relates to social, moral and political norms and ideologies.

“Law and sexuality intersect primarily in the fields of criminal law, family law and constitutional law. Each of those fields is strongly represented on Buffalo’s faculty,” Boucai says, “but at the same time, the school lacks someone with my particular focus. So there’s a place for me, in terms of what’s already here and also what’s not.

“Buffalo has a well-deserved reputation as a home to serious scholars. It’s intellectually rigorous, engaged and adventurous. There’s an openness to substantive and methodological innovation, and the faculty is genuinely interdisciplinary. All these qualities make it an excellent fit.”

Boucai was a history major as an undergraduate at Yale, where he edited the Yale Journal of Human Rights. From there he went to law school at Georgetown University Law Center, where he was a Public Interest Law Scholar. “I wanted to be an impact litigator, particularly in the field of LGBT rights. But I soon discovered that the things that most interested me were more critical, more academic and oftentimes more historical. I recognized that there are many wonderful litigators in the world, and that, if I had something unique to contribute, it would be from a scholarly perspective.”

After clerking in Miami for 11th Circuit Judge Rosemary Barkett and then spending two years practicing commercial and bankruptcy law in New York City, Boucai pursued a master’s degree in history at the University of Cambridge. While in England, he volunteered with Lawyers Without Borders; ironically, his work for the organization related primarily to American death penalty cases.

Since 2009, Boucai has been a law teaching fellow at the Williams Institute, a think tank housed at UCLA School of Law that studies law and policy relating to sexual orientation and gender identity. “It’s been wonderful to get my start in legal academia teaching the subjects I love most,” Boucai says. “And as a scholar, I’ve benefited from interactions with some of the most astute and experienced people in the field.”

Boucai’s current research deals with the first same-sex marriage cases (from the early 1970s) and with the relationship between same-sex marriage and sexual liberty. He appreciates the University’s openness toward same-sex couples, even before the state passed legislation last year to recognize same-sex unions, and particularly its recognition of de facto domestic partnerships. “As an unmarried person with a longtime partner, it makes a big difference that my relationship, whether married or not, will be recognized by the school,” Boucai says. “Also, New York provides such a rich case study on the law and politics of same-sex marriage that I’m thinking of making it the centerpiece of seminar.”

Boucai brings to Buffalo an ambitious roster of research interests, including projects on the non-enforcement of obscenity law; sexual age-of-consent laws and their role in the cultural construction of childhood; the “erasure” of bisexuals in gay rights efforts; and a critique, grounded in the Establishment Clause, of marriage solemnization statute. He also is considering a book-length project on the 19th century Anglo-Irish writer Oscar Wilde, whom he studied at Cambridge.

Beyond the work (“and my work is fun,” he says), Boucai is an opera fan, plays tennis and does yoga, and, he says, is cultivating an interest in film.