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Going the distance

New associate professor Meredith Lewis comes from half a world away

“S"o many people have said, ‘I can’t believe you moved to New Zealand,'” says Meredith Kolsky Lewis. “‘I could never do that.' But it was a very attractive thing to do, from my perspective.”

Lewis, who joins the SUNY Buffalo Law faculty next spring, has taught since 2005 at Victoria University of Wellington Law School, in Wellington, New Zealand, where she co-founded and is currently associate director of the New Zealand Centre of International Economic Law. She teaches and writes in the area of international trade law.

As in much of the world, law is an undergraduate course of study in New Zealand, and Lewis says many of her law students there double-majored in another subject. “For most New Zealand students,” she says, “going to law school is not a momentous decision because if they don’t like it or aren’t good at it, they can just focus on their other degree.”

By comparison, she says, “American students are more invested in their legal study, because if you go to law school in the United States, there is a real opportunity cost to doing so. You could get a job doing something else, but instead you are assuming a fair amount of debt to do this course of study, and if you were to stop in the middle there is no perceived gain in credentials. For that reason and because American law students are on average older, I think U.S. law students on the whole are more concerned with studying hard and doing well.”

At SUNY Buffalo Law, Lewis will teach classes on public international law — “laws that affect states rather than private business behavior” — and on private international law, involving commercial matters that cross borders. Regular courses will likely include International Business Transactions and International Trade Law.

A Washington, D.C., native, Lewis studied economics and political science at Northwestern University, and took three years of Japanese language training as well. She went on to earn a master’s degree at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, as part of a four-year program in which she also earned her law degree from Georgetown’s law school. “I’m not good at picking a single focus,” she says. “I wanted to go to law school but I also really liked the political science research I did in college, so I thought, maybe I can do both.”

She then worked for eight years at the Washington, D.C., office of the New York law firm Shearman & Sterling LLP, practicing in the areas of international trade and commercial litigation. In 1999 she put that Japanese language training to good use, spending six months in the firm’s Tokyo office advising the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry on international trade issues. She primarily represented foreign companies, both in litigation and international trade matters, including clients based in Germany, Japan, Italy, Mexico and Great Britain. Another highlight: a litigation matter that went to trial in federal District Court in New Jersey and resulted, she says, in the sixth-biggest jury verdict in the country that year (fortunately her firm’s clients were the plaintiffs). “The (Italy-based) clients were so happy they took the entire trial team to Italy to celebrate.”

The move to academia, she says, was part decision and part happenstance. “I had always been interested in teaching and had always liked the opportunities I had to tutor or teach more informally,” Lewis said, “but it was difficult to focus on making a change while working long law firm hours.” But during her stay in Tokyo she became eligible for a one-month sabbatical and decided to visit at a law school and do some research. She spent the month at the Victoria University of Wellington law school, and the die was cast. Three years later when the school was looking to hire, Lewis leapt at the opportunity and never looked back.

Professor Lewis has been very active in promoting the international economic law discipline internationally. In addition to co-founding the New Zealand Centre of International Economic Law in Wellington, she is also a founding member and currently co-head of the Society of International Economic Law, an organization founded in 2007 that now has approximately 800 members. In her scholarship, Lewis has examined the applicability of economic principles to international trade law issues; conducted broad-ranging examinations of the effects of free trade agreements; and engaged in empirical and theoretical work concerning dissent in WTO dispute settlement.

Lewis and her husband, Kent Lewis, met at Georgetown Law. They have a 10-year-old son, Owen, and an 8-year-old daughter, Claudia.