First Among Equals: New Director of Clinical Programs Brings Wide Experience

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UB Law’s Clinical Legal Education program – the eight clinical settings in which students learn and serve in such areas as family law, elder law, environmental law, affordable housing and mediation – is one of the school’s signature assets. Now Professor Kim Diana Connolly, who joins the faculty this fall from the University of South Carolina School of Law, is looking to take the clinical program to the next level.

Connolly, who is immediate past president of the Clinical Legal Education Association, the national umbrella organization for law school clinical programs and largest membership organization of law professors nationwide, says she’s excited to have the chance to direct UB Law’s clinical program. "I wanted this job because I get to be the first among equals of people who are doing amazing clinical work," she says. "They’re so busy doing great work, they don’t stop to toot their own horn. I’ll be relieving them of paperwork and hopefully helping them to get more support to do what they do. Part of it is helping train some spotlights on some of the things they have been doing."

Connolly says UB Law’s clinical program is well-regarded nationally, part of a wider movement to integrate both the theory and the practice of law in clinics as an effective teaching tool. "We must graduate students who are good thinkers and good analysts," she says. "And part of being a problem-solver is having levels of skills, not in the trade school sense of 'There’s where the courthouse is,' but in the sense of 'Here’s a messy, sticky situation, how do we approach it? How do we think through the options and create a wraparound advocacy approach that is going to achieve the client’s goals?"

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Connolly, who holds both U.S. and Canadian citizenship, says one immediate goal will be to examine whether an international environmental clinic would fit well in UB Law’s curriculum. As a scholar, Connolly is most active in the field of environmental law, and she has special interest and expertise in legal issues around wetlands. Raised on Cape Cod, Mass., she says, “I grew up with a view of the ocean and wetlands. They are essential parts of my personal ecosystem. As I started to get into the practice of law, I realized how interrelated and convoluted the set of statutory and regulatory guidelines are that provide some level of protection for wetlands.”

When she goes to grade schools to talk to kids about wetlands, she brings props: a sponge, a coffee filter and a doll’s bed. It’s an object lesson in the value of wetlands for flood storage, filtration of waters that people rely on for drinking, and habitat for animal species, including, she says, the 47 percent of listed endangered species that spend at least part of their life cycle in wetlands.

She talks to adults, too – she has testified before Congress on wetlands regulation and wrote an amicus brief for the U.S. Supreme Court.

Connolly majored in chemistry as an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina. She earned the J.D. at Georgetown University Law Center, and recently completed a master of laws degree in the Environmental Law Program at George Washington University Law School. She has practiced environmental law in three firms and did related work before starting law school with a non-profit organization.

At UB Law, she will teach a non-clinical course called Environmental Advocacy – a simulation course in which students work in teams. "I choose an actual, current controversy that people who are in the practice of law are actively dealing with," Connolly says. "Then I make up a pretend client and a very narrow fact pattern, and have students work with real documentation. They write administrative comments, legislative testimony, a litigation planning memo and an op-ed piece, and participate in simulated hearings. We’ll also bring in guests who are stakeholders on all sides of the issue."

Connolly and her partner, Jim Cumberland, are the parents of daughter Tayte, 8, and son Simon, 4. They also share a love for greyhounds “rescued” after the dogs’ racing career ends, and have adopted a number of them.

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