Land Rover: Jessica Owley Lippmann Follows Her Passion for Environmental Issues to UB Law

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Jessica Owley Lippmann follows her passion for environmental issues to UB Law

Jessica Owley Lippmann, who joins the Law School faculty this fall, comes by her interest in environmental law, well, naturally. Owley Lippmann grew up in what she calls “a very urban setting” in Milwaukee; her mother was a union organizer, so their home was steeped in the language of justice. As a high school student, Owley Lippmann spent a year abroad, studying in Norway, the country from which her grandparents had immigrated. It opened her eyes.

“In Norway, I was living on a farm, and I saw a very different style of life, a very different relationship to the environment,” she says. “In Norway, I was living on a farm, and I saw a very different style of life, a very different relationship to the environment,” she says. “Norwegians in general are much more forward-thinking than Americans are on environmental issues.”

She went on to Wellesley College, where she studied physics but also founded a student environmental group, and then to the University of California, Berkeley. There she pursued environmental planning, earning a master’s degree in landscape architecture, before earning her J.D. at Boalt Hall (recently renamed Berkeley Law) and a Ph.D. in Environmental Science, Policy, and Management. (She was able to overlap some of the law school and doctoral coursework, she says: “I like to stay busy.”)

That was followed by two years clerking in U.S. District Court and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals; two years at a San Francisco law firm where she practiced land use and environmental litigation; and most recently, a year spent teaching at Pace Law School in White Plains, N.Y., a small school with a strong environmental law program.

“This wasn’t a meandering path,” Owley Lippmann says in looking back. “I realized from my first year of law school that I wanted to be a law professor. Through all of these experiences, I have always been intrigued by legal academia and research. I love working with students.”

Owley Lippmann’s interests revolve around what she terms “the evolving meaning of property and ownership. I am particularly interested in how shifting meanings and interpretations affect environmental values and regulatory schemes.” Her doctoral dissertation, by way of example, looked at “exact conservation easements,” which can result when property owners seek a permit to alter their land and the permitting agency requires a conservation easement to mitigate the environmental damage that results.

Her work is informed by political ecology – the study of how political, economic and social factors affect environmental issues. “It’s not traditionally a field that a law professor would study or invoke,” she allows, “but it lends itself very well to the study of the law, especially environmental law. You have to look beyond just the statutes and case law to see how the law is being shaped and used.”

As well, she’s intrigued by the power of narrative. “Stories matter,” Owley Lippmann says. “The way we talk about things, and the stories we tell, make a difference.” As individuals talk about property ownership, for example, “they say, ‘You can’t come on my land’ or ‘This is private property’. I’m interested in the terms that people use when they’re sitting around the kitchen table, talking to their friends about their view of what property is.”

At UB, she will find kindred interdisciplinary spirits. “I’m looking forward to working with a lot of people here,” she says, “not just the environment people and not just in the Law School. I’ve been talking with some of the professors and bringing together ideas about interdisciplinary teaching. I’m hoping that I get the chance to work with a lot of them or at least get their feedback on my work.”

As part of a two-part Environmental Law course shared with Professor Barry B. Boyer, Owley Lippmann will teach a segment on natural resources. She’ll also lead a seminar on land conservation in the context of global climate change, with a novel twist: She and her students will work in concert with classes at five other universities, sharing research on conservation easements and bringing a variety of perspectives to their shared discussions.

Owley Lippmann is married to Julian Lippmann, a Ph.D. in mechanical engineering who will teach in UB’s new Department of Biomedical Engineering. Department. They have a daughter, Charlotte, who is 1 year old.