Alumni, Firms Support Launch of New Advocacy Institute

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The room was packed and the energy was electric as SUNY Buffalo Law School kicked off its new Advocacy Institute, an ambitious initiative to help students and legal practitioners develop their skills in the critical task of advocating for their clients.

About 200 people, many of them prominent local attorneys and judges, were present at the April 4 kickoff event for the institute, held at the Hotel @ The Lafayette in downtown Buffalo. They were there to celebrate this milestone in skills development for our students, and to celebrate the substantial alumni support in expertise and money that will help build the institute.

The Advocacy Institute, to be funded by private donors, the Law School and the University, will build on SUNY Buffalo Law’s recent success in the moot court and trial advocacy programs that give students real-world experience in trial and appellate advocacy. Plans for the institute envision an expansion and further strengthening of those programs; new courses on advocacy topics; training for faculty in the best ways to teach these skills; and continuing education opportunities for members of the local bar.

One goal, says Vice Dean for Academic Affairs Charles Patrick Ewing, who will oversee the institute until a permanent head is named, is to raise Buffalo Law’s profile as one of the nation’s Top 10 law schools for advocacy training.

The first phase of alumni support is being led by five major donors, all of whom have invested $100,000 or more in initial support: Buffalo litigation attorney Terrence M. Connors ’71 and four local firms: Goldberg Segalla, Brown Chiari, Phillips Lytle, and Damon Morey.

Connors will serve as chair of the institute’s Advisory Board.

“I’m all in,” Connors said at the kickoff event. “Because advocacy is at the very core of what we do. It doesn’t matter whether you’re center stage at a high-profile trial or in a real estate carrel at the Erie County clerk’s office, it’s all about zealous advocacy for our clients. That’s what we do, and that’s what SUNY Buffalo lawyers do better than anybody. “I see a law school that will excel at this field, I see lawyers coming out as great advocates and great people, and I’m glad to be a part of it,” Connors said. “I think it’s going to be a great asset to this Law School, to our community and to all the lawyers in this area."

“Brown Chiari is a litigation firm

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that prides itself on its trial experience and successes achieved in the courtroom,” said Donald P. Chiari ’83. “In the past, at least in my day at the Law School, there were only a few programs that taught the art of advocacy. The Law School has come a long way in that regard and has focused in recent years not only on the legal education required but also on the actual practice of law. We are very proud to support the new Advocacy Institute and join the Law School’s tremendous effort to make its students courtroom-ready.”

“We think it’s very important, especially at a point in time when younger lawyers and law students don’t have the same opportunity to learn their craft in the courtroom, that they receive excellent training in school,” said Neil A. Goldberg ’72, a founding partner with Goldberg Segalla. “We appreciate everything that the Law School has done for us, so we want to give back. It makes us feel very good to be able to do this. We as a firm appreciate the need to give back to the legal community, and this is one way we’re able to do that.”

Said Peter S. Marlette, managing partner of Damon Morey, “We are proud to be able to make this type of commitment to the Law School and its Advocacy Institute. I think it says a great deal about the success that Damon Morey has had, and there is no question that a great deal of what we have been able to achieve is based on the large number of terrifically trained attorneys from SUNY Buffalo Law School who continue to join our firm each year.”

In addition to the five founders, who collectively gave more than $600,000, the Law School is seeking to identify five or six additional founders and to raise a minimum of $1 million in initial support for the institute.

Another major aim of the institute, Ewing says, is to train faculty members – both full-time professors and the practitioners who serve as adjunct professors – to be more effective teachers of advocacy skills. “Our hope,” he says, “is to bring in nationally known trial and appellate advocacy attorneys and instructors to teach our faculty to be better instructors. Another goal is to send members of our faculty to programs around the country to improve their advocacy and teaching skills.”

The first instance of such faculty training came April 5, when two of the best-known advocacy professors in the nation – Charles Rose of Stetson University Law School and Zelda Harris of Loyola Law School – worked with students, faculty and moot court coaches, offering critiques and teaching tools.

“The fact that you have that many loyal, respected, high-caliber alumni willing to give back to the institution says a lot for the long-term success of that program,” said Harris, whose own advocacy program ranks eighth nationwide. “I was impressed by the level of support that the alumni have toward the development and furtherance of the institute. And I saw a lot of current students who were all really energized and excited about the potential. The commitment and training and interest is definitely there; now it’s just about implementing best practices.”

Said Rose, whose program U.S. News & World Report has ranked No. 1 nationwide for 16 years running: “The Advocacy Institute is the natural outreach of the bar’s commitment to effective professional advocacy, and I expect that Buffalo will very quickly make a mark regionally and nationally. The thing I came away with, from faculty, students and the local bar, is that these are genuine people who have a mission that they care about. When you’ve got good folks committed to something, the only thing that’s going to stop them is if they fail to do the work, and that’s not going to happen in Buffalo.”

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— Professor Charles Rose