Dennis Patterson ’80 Joins Elite European Institute

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D. Christopher Decker ’98 works for human rights

The capital of Kosovo is called Pristina, but there is nothing pristine about it. The city is a living laboratory for implementing the rule of law, and D. Christopher Decker ’98 sees that process from the inside. Decker works with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the world’s largest regional security organization. At OSCE’s mission in Kosovo he oversees the Human Rights and Communities Department, which trains and monitors police officers and judges around human rights issues, helps to draft legislation on fair treatment of minority populations, works to ensure property rights and fights human trafficking.

The seeds of this important and challenging work were sown in his experience at UB Law. Decker had an international law fellowship in Istanbul, with a group that worked with torture victims. “I saw firsthand the psychological and medical effects of torture,” he says. “It certainly did mentally prepare me to go out to Kosovo.”

When he left Buffalo, he earned a master of laws degree at Essex University in England, and then plunged into the world of international human rights. He first went to Kosovo – the disputed region in the Balkans, smaller than the state of Connecticut, that last year declared its independence from Serbia – in 1999, with the International Crisis Group. The assignment immediately followed the end of the Kosovo War. “We took about 6,000 statements from witnesses and victims in an attempt to map or re-create how the conflict occurred,” Decker says. “One of the tasks was to go to exhumations of graves. I did see my fair share of dead bodies.”

He eventually was asked to join OSCE in 2000, and except for a three-year stint as a researcher at the European Center for Minority Issues, in Germany, he has been part of the organization ever since.

“It is a bit like a mini-United Nations,” Decker says of OSCE. Formed at the end of the Cold War as a security conference between the United States and the Soviet Union, OSCE now has 56 member states. The mission in Kosovo is its largest.

In his department’s legislative work, Decker says, the goal is enforcement. “For the most part, Kosovo has quite decent legislation, drafted by or with the international community,” he says. “Now it is a question of getting the authorities to implement it in a meaningful way.”

“Everybody, myself included, wants to live in Italy,” Patterson says. “Now I can’t imagine a job teaching international law. I can’t imagine a job teaching anywhere that I would want more than this. To sit and look at the skyline of Florence, it’s just like it is in the movies.”

The appointment is for five years and can be renewed for an additional three. Patterson will take an extended leave of absence from Rutgers University School of Law at Camden, where he holds a Board of Governors professorship and teaches international trade and legal philosophy as well as a basic contracts course. He will return to teach at Camden in the summers.

“Everybody, myself included, wants to live in Italy;” Patterson says. “Now I get to live there and have a nice academic job. I can’t imagine a job teaching anywhere that I would want more than this. To sit and look at the skyline of Florence, it’s just like it is in the movies.”

One advantage of interviewing for a position in Europe, he says, is quick decision-making. “In the U.S., hiring decisions drag out for months. In Europe, the hiring committees almost all have external members, people in the field from outside the school who read all the application packages, do the interviewing and vote. Since these people are brought in for one-day meetings, everything has to be done at the end of the day.” He was offered the position on the same day he interviewed.

At the institute, Patterson will be teaching master of laws and Ph.D. students, nearly all, he says, from Europe, but also some from Russia, South America and Africa. He will teach an introductory course in jurisprudence and another in the foundations of international law.

“I’ve taught in Europe for last 20 years,” Patterson says. “I’m very familiar with the students and the environment that they come from. This is a very elite place. They get the best students, and a lot of people want to go there. It’s a very prestigious degree.”

A native of Manhattan, Patterson went from UB Law to a judicial clerkship in Maine, and then into private practice for six years. Since then he has traveled the globe in his teaching, including visiting professorships in Australia, London, Germany, Italy, Austria and Washington, D.C. He has been at Rutgers since 1995 and was named Board of Governors professor, an honor recognizing a scholar’s international reputation, last year.