Human Rights Pioneer: Virginia Leary, Lawyer, Professor, Human Rights Activist, Passes Away in Geneva, Switzerland

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Virginia Leary, lawyer, professor, human rights activist passes away in Geneva, Switzerland

Professor Emerita Virginia Leary, SUNY Distinguished Service Professor at the University at Buffalo Law School, passed away April 8 in Geneva, Switzerland, where she had lived since retiring from UB Law in 1995. Apparently, Professor Leary suffered a heart attack. Professor Leary was a beloved member of the Law School and the University at Buffalo, where she taught for 19 years.

Professor Leary was a pioneer in teaching and scholarship in human rights law, a field in which she put UB Law on the global map. She was long a leader in international law and served with distinction on the Executive Council of the American Society of International Law. She was a visiting professor and frequent lecturer at several universities and conferences around the world. Professor Leary, who consulted extensively for NGOs and intergovernmental organizations, including the United Nations, was one of the first women to attain universal recognition in international law. Her work as a scholar and practitioner in labor rights and economic, social and cultural rights was exemplary.

Even in retirement from UB Law, Professor Leary never lost touch with this law school. She repeatedly came back to visit. She helped mentor UB Law students in human rights. Professor Leary was the UB Law Commencement speaker in 2004.

Says Makau Mutua, UB Law dean: “For me, the loss is very personal, as I am sure it is for her colleagues here.

“When I came to UB Law in 1996 to teach international law and human rights, she offered me invaluable advice and assistance. We kept in touch over the years, and her wise counsel to me was priceless.

“We have lost a giant in human rights and international law, but her legacy and contributions to the field and to the most vulnerable peoples on earth will live on.”