Highest honor goes to interim dean

The scholar and teacher who has guided UB School of Law for more than two years as interim dean received the school’s highest honor, the Edwin F. Jaeckle Award.

James A. Gardner, who joined the School of Law faculty in 2001, accepted the award on Jan. 27 at the Union League Club in Manhattan, as part of the school’s annual New York City Alumni Luncheon. The Jaeckle Award is given annually to “an individual who has distinguished himself or herself and has made significant contributions to the School of Law and the legal profession.”

After greetings by master of ceremonies Terrence M. Connors ’71 – who himself received the award last year – and UB Law Alumni Association President Brian D. Gwitt ’98, attendees heard an update on progress at the school from Dean’s Advisory Council Chair Douglas W. Dimitroff ’89.

There was, he said, plenty to celebrate: an improving employment rate; a high-quality entering class; core strengths in our advocacy and clinic programs; and the success of the school’s historic seven-year, $30 million fundraising campaign. Dimitroff also noted that law students had contributed over 6,500 hours of community service work in 2016.

“The strategic plan that has been brought forward under Jim’s leadership recognizes the value of knowledge and ways of thinking that a law education provides for a wide variety of applications and professions,” said UB Provost Charles F. Zukoski. “As a result of Jim’s leadership, the School of Law is much stronger and much more efficient than it was in past years.”

SUNY Distinguished Professor Guyora Binder, who serves as vice dean for research and faculty development, reflected that Gardner’s success as interim dean grew from the high standards he sets for himself and others, evidenced by his widely recognized scholarship on state constitutional law and election law and by his reputation among UB School of Law students. “Many students recount that a course with him did more to transform them into functioning professionals than any other part of their legal education,” Binder said.

After Connors gave voice to stories from Gardner’s friends and former colleagues, it was the honoree’s moment to shine.

He began by acknowledging the hard work of his incredible team, saying, “The School of Law’s accomplishments during the period of my deanship are almost entirely the work of others.”

Gardner also noted that his time as interim dean has taught him some humbling lessons. He has learned that “the job of being dean is the job of filling a role. There are expectations, there are conventions, there are traditions. Filling a role well is a real achievement, and if I can claim any accomplishment, I really hope that it’s that.”

It’s not an easy job. So why did he accept it? Gardner said he did so to repay two debts.

“The first is my debt to the legal profession,” he said. “I really like being a lawyer. The privilege of becoming a lawyer was really a transformative moment for me.

“The second debt was my debt to UB School of Law. I really didn’t feel like my career started until the moment I arrived in Buffalo. I joined an extraordinary intellectual community, but also a social community. It was welcoming, it was supportive, it was affirmative, it was kind. I felt immediately welcomed by the faculty, the administration, the students and alumni, and Lise and I immediately felt completely at home. And in that environment I really found it easy to flourish as a teacher and as a scholar. It has been a privilege and a great pleasure to give back to that community by serving.”