4-1-2017

High Honor for A Thought Leader in the Law

UB Law Forum

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol31/iss2/16

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Publications at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in UB Law Forum by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.
High honor for a thought leader in the law

Legend has it, says Professor David Engel, that the first national meeting of the Law & Society Association took place in the living room of Richard D. “Red” Schwartz, UB School of Law’s dean in the early 1970s and a pioneer in the sociological study of law.

Nobody’s living room is big enough now. The Law & Society Association, the world’s premier organization for the interdisciplinary study of law, now counts its membership in the thousands. Some 2,400 are expected at the group’s annual meeting in June in Mexico City. It’s there that Engel will accept the association’s highest honor, the Harry J. Kalven Jr. Prize, in recognition of his long and continuing work in interdisciplinary legal study.

“Throughout more than four decades,” the official announcement says, “Professor Engel’s fields of scholarly inquiry have expanded to include a wide array of issues in the United States, Asia and beyond, including the examination of disputing practices and behavior, legal consciousness and legal meaning-making, rights as social practice, and the gap between official law and legal practice.”

Engel looks at how the legal system actually works in various societies, including our own – thinking about how custom, social norms and belief structures interact with black-letter law. His most recent book, The Myth of the Litigious Society: Why We Don’t Sue (University of Chicago Press), argues that U.S. culture isn’t as litigious as it’s often said to be, and examines why most U.S. injury victims never lodge a claim against their injurers.

Engel, who previously served as president of the Law & Society Association, also has been a thought leader globally, working especially to build an international research network among scholars in the Pacific Rim countries. (About a quarter of the association’s members live outside the United States.) He is a founding co-editor of the Asian Journal of Law and Society.

“The Kalven Prize is especially meaningful to me because this is the organization that really helped shape my identity as a scholar,” says Engel. “Attending their meetings, and reading the literature that Law and Society scholars were publishing in the 1960s and 1970s, led me to a way of formulating my own scholarship and then finding colleagues with whom I could share my ideas.”

He also traces his scholarly roots to his experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand before attending law school. He took notice of how the legal system worked in practice. “You could see that the law was operating in ways that could not be explained just by reading legal rules and court opinions,” Engel says. “So if you wanted to understand what was really happening, you had to look at the surrounding culture and developments outside the courtroom.”

The Kalven Prize is not intended to be a lifetime achievement award. It recognizes current as well as past scholarship. Engel notes wryly that he hopes it won’t be a capstone to his Law and Society career. He’s already working on his next book – on relational injuries in American tort law – and he is increasingly involved in training young scholars, especially in Asia. In addition, he accepts many invitations to visit universities in the United States and abroad to talk with students and faculty about Law and Society research. With colleagues at the National University of Singapore, he is also organizing a regular series of workshops for junior Law and Society scholars, working to encourage interdisciplinary legal research and strengthen international bonds among American and Asian colleagues.

SUNY Distinguished Service Professor David M. Engel has taught at the law school since 1981.