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Building Bridges to Activists: Training Global Lawyers to Fight Domestic Violence

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Building bridges to activists

Training global lawyers to fight domestic violence

Build a better mousetrap, it is said, and the world will beat a path to your door. Develop expertise in identifying, preventing and prosecuting domestic violence, and the same thing happens.

That is what members of UB Law School’s Women, Children, and Social Justice Clinic are discovering as they continue to build bridges to activists against domestic violence worldwide. The world has come to UB Law in the person of a prosecutor from Brazil, Eduardo Muchado, and a young activist from the former Soviet republic of Georgia, Maia Jaliashvili. They are learning all they can, with the expectation that the conversation will continue after they return to their home countries to try to make the world safer for women and children.

“We are talking about some ongoing collaboration,” says Clinical Professor Suzanne Tomkins, a specialist in issues of domestic violence. “As a result of Eduardo’s experience a program has been formalized where more prosecutors would come to UB from Brazil. This has been a great experience on both sides.”

“We are not training academics,” says
“Something is starting to happen in the domestic violence area in Brazil. The government is so excited about this that we received two prosecutors this month in order to build a bridge to UB.”
—Eduardo Muchado, a prosecutor from Brazil

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—Clinical Professor Suzanne Tomkins, a specialist in issues of domestic violence

“They are a very valuable resource for us,” Marcus added. “We are learning enormous amounts from them.”

Muchado works as a prosecutor -- a kind of public advocate -- in the Minas Gerais state of Brazil. He said his government sent two prosecutors abroad for training -- one to Italy to study organized crime, and himself to Buffalo. The Institute of Brazilian-American scholars, he says, “pointed me to UB as a good option.”

Now, he said, is an opportune time for his training. “Something is starting to happen in the domestic violence area in Brazil,” he says. “The government is so excited about this that we received two prosecutors this month in order to build a bridge to UB. We just had the first public prosecution office open in Brazil to take care of domestic violence cases” – an office like an American district attorney’s office.

Prosecutors, he said, are in a position to effect real change. “We can sue the government in order to really pursue changes in many areas,” Muchado says. “That is our major job today, to sue the government to make sure human rights are working. For example, we want to create some shelters, and we can sue the government in order to oblige the government to make these shelters.

“We are pretty naïve about domestic violence in Brazil,” he says. “We have treated domestic violence like an anger management program. That is not working. We are spending money on these kinds of programs, and we have to change our focus so we focus more on the criminal act.”

Jaliashvili works on domestic violence issues for the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association, founded in 1994. With 600 members, it advocates for the rule of law against human rights abuses, and provides free legal services to needy persons in Georgia. It also hopes to establish a law school in the former Soviet republic.

Jaliashvili helped to create a shelter there -- the only one so far. She also works as a consultant on human trafficking, representing both victims of domestic violence and victims of trafficking.

“Domestic violence law is really new in our country, only about one year old,” she says. “The experience of people in our country with this is not very high. I am trying to get as much information as I can, to use for my country.”

Her organization advises the Georgian government on the drafting of laws, and Jaliashvili said what she has learned at UB Law will help her to recommend how to address shortcomings in the current domestic violence law. “As the law gets older, you understand where the gaps are,” she says. “As soon as I go back home, I know what I have to offer the government.”