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

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Law School Report

GOING GLOBAL

Building bridges to activists



Left to right: Brazilian prosecutor Eduardo Muchado, former General Attorney of the Minas Gerais region of Brazil Epaminondas Neto, Brazilian prosecutor Lais Silveira and UB Law Clinic Co-Director and Clinical Professor Suzanne E. Tomkins.

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

Professor Isabel Marcus, a member of the law faculty specializing in international human rights and domestic violence. “These are people who can take back the things that they learn here and use them in training others. We become an ongoing resource for them.”

In addition, Tomkins and Johanna Oreskovic, director of post-professional education, have been invited to travel to Brazil in March and present to interested parties there on policies and programs that have proved effective against domestic violence. And Jaliashvili has asked Tomkins and Marcus to do work with the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association, the NGO for which she advocates for domestic violence issues.

More than the nuts and bolts of legal and social-assistance structures, though, the professors say working effectively against domestic violence in other cultures may mean changing deeply held attitudes. “It is about the transformation of consciousness,” Marcus said. “It is not just a law-and-order question. It is a much broader question about changing the consciousness of families and family relationships.”

Jaliashvili is in Buffalo under a fellowship that Marcus has privately endowed for scholars from nongovernmental organizations, believing that NGOs “are the watchdog for governments living up to their international obligations.” She is hoping that others on the faculty will fund similar fellowships in their own areas of specialization.

“In Eastern Europe there are a number of young, dedicated people who really want to accelerate social change,” Marcus said. “Maia is very clear on what it means to deal with these issues in a patriarchal society.”

But beyond the imparting of knowledge, the professors said, the presence of international visitors has enlivened classroom discussion of these issues. “This has opened up new doors for our students that would never be opened otherwise,” Tomkins says, citing for example Jaliashvili’s interest in and knowledge of human trafficking.



“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 hap-

pen 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 and 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.”