Growing the Next Generation of Lawyers

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When I was in law school,” Tolu Odunsi remembers, “I developed great relationships with so many professors. They taught me a lot, and they empowered me to be a good lawyer. It’s my goal to do the same for the students who come through my classes.”

Those will be first-year UB School of Law students in the school’s foundational Legal Analysis, Writing and Research program, which Odunsi joins this fall as an instructor. She’ll teach two sections, with about 15 students each, joining her colleagues in delivering intensive instruction in the basics of legal research, analysis and argumentation.

It’s a new career juncture for Odunsi. She earned her J.D. at American University’s Washington College of Law, where she graduated cum laude and was a senior staff member of the school’s International Law Review. After graduation, a legal internship and a law clerkship, Odunsi worked as an associate attorney at the Buffalo law firm Gibson, McAskill & Crosby, practicing in the area of civil litigation.

But, she says, “It had always been a dream of mine to end up in academ ia, ” and she feels a strong connection to UB School of Law, where she has been a mentor to students and has volunteered to judge the Black Law Students Association’s moot court competition. She also has strong connections in the local legal community; she currently serves as president of the Minority Bar Association of Western New York and on the board of the Center for Elder Law and Justice.

She recognizes that, as a younger lawyer, she has insight into the challenges that students of the millennial generation face in the classroom. “We’ve grown up having such quick access to information, and that’s in contrast to how learning is in law school,” Odunsi says. “You really have to take time with the material to understand the precedent. Legal research and writing isn’t a quick process, and it involves a lot of rewriting.”

A dream come true: When Odunsi was named last year to Buffalo Business First’s “30 Under 30” list of up-and-coming young professionals, she was asked to name her “professional goal before I turn 40.” Her answer: “Teach a law school class.”

Two books with an eye on society

In a happy coincidence, Cambridge University Press has released a one-two punch of David Engel-related books. For the first, Injury and Injustice: The Cultural Politics of Harm and Redress, Engel was one of three co-editors. Squarely in the law and society tradition, the book examines how cultures worldwide understand injury and its relation to the justice system.

Engel also contributed a chapter, titled “Chairs, Stairs, and Automobiles: The Cultural Construction of Injuries and the Failed Promise of Law.” It draws on the thinking that went into his 2016 book The Myth of the Litigious Society. “The theory of tort law,” he says, “is that litigation will deter dangerous or risky behavior; it will compensate people when they suffer injuries and struggle with their medical bills and damaged careers; and it will provide a moral statement of who’s to blame when unnecessary risks are posed. But those promises fail if very few people with valid claims actually use the tort system.”

Injury and Injustice also includes chapters by UB School of Law Professor Samantha Barbas and by Li Chen, a former UB dual degree law student sponsored by the Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy, who is now a history professor at the University of Toronto.

The other book grew from a Baldy Center conference that took place in 2015. In Insiders, Outsiders, Injuries, and Law: Revisiting “The Oven Bird’s Song,” legal scholars young and old take stock of a groundbreaking article by Engel first published in 1984. In that article, he examined how predominant norms and values in a rural Illinois county discouraged injury litigation, even when residents believed they had suffered serious wrongs. Engel argued that anxiety about social and economic changes in the community found expression in negative perceptions of tort claims as compared to positive perceptions of contract claims.

“The Oven Bird’s Song” is such an enduringly influential work that law and society scholars around the world turn to David’s work again and again and again for insight and inspiration,” the book’s editor, UB sociology professor Mary Nell Trautner, writes in her introduction.

This book, too, includes a significant UB Law presence, with chapters by Associate Professor Anya Bernstein and Emeritus Professors Alfred S. Konefsky and Lynn Mather.