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From the courtroom to the classroom

Two new adjunct instructors are introducing their hard-won lessons into their teaching

Practical wisdom from a long career

Back when he was a law student, says Christopher Belling ’74, the curriculum tilted more toward the theoretical than the practical. “There was very little relationship between going to law school and practicing law,” he remembers. “You stumbled out the door, you stumbled through the bar exam, and then you were completely on your own.” Now, he says, “the School of Law has moved to a more practical approach, and I can help with that.”

Belling, who recently joined the faculty as an adjunct instructor, has plenty to draw on in that role. A longtime and high-profile trial prosecutor in the Erie County District Attorney’s Office, he is now of counsel to the Chautauqua County DA’s Office. He also has mentored new trial attorneys as colleagues and taught widely on subjects including trial advocacy and prosecutorial ethics.

He says his Criminal Procedure II course at the School of Law “puts the emphasis on the practical issues that we deal with on a daily basis in the courts.” For example, Belling says, he speaks to the students about the intricacies of jury selection that aren’t reflected in the statutes; how to negotiate a plea disposition in a case; and how to safeguard a defendant’s rights as his case progresses. The emphasis is on the nuts and bolts of practice in state court, rather than at the federal level. “If the law students have this information,” he says, “it might determine whether they want to practice criminal law at all, and it might impact their development as a lawyer.”

Belling previously taught a bridge-term course at the School of Law on the state laws that govern decisions on suppression of evidence. In addition to presenting many continuing legal education seminars over the years, he has trained prosecutors at the state and national levels, as well as police and other forensic professionals.

He also has served as trial counsel for the New York Prosecutors Training Institute, in Albany; as a consultant to the 62 district attorneys in New York State; and as a special district attorney and special counsel in several DA’s offices statewide.

Focused attention on a crucial skill

As supervising attorney for the Federal Public Defender’s Office in Buffalo, Kimberly Schechter represented indigent defendants charged with federal offenses. Her position involved mentoring younger associates, as well as defending her own roster of clients, all while facing multiple deadlines and responding to a never-ending stream of email.

What a difference retirement makes. Now, as an adjunct instructor in the School of Law’s LAWR program, she can bring that same attention to small classes in her Persuasive Legal Writing class, a high-level elective. The result is focused attention for second-year students who want to get even better at persuading a judge to rule in their favor.

“This course brings it up a notch,” says Schechter, whose career at the Federal Public Defender’s Office spanned 23 years. “It’s a little more intense, and geared more toward advocacy as opposed to general research. Students need to learn the case law that applies and figure out what the issues are. The main goal of the course is to convert that research into persuasive legal argument.”

The course is built around a single hypothetical case based on a fact pattern of a typical federal criminal case. The students then research the issues and create separate documents that track the evolution of a case throughout the court process. Typically, those documents will be an interoffice memorandum assessing the case, a motion addressing substantive issues that were uncovered in their research, and then an appeal to the Second Circuit Court of Appeals.

Schechter took an unusual route to law school. She was working as a paralegal on Long Island when she realized that her work was not all that different from what the firm’s associate attorneys were doing. “It seemed silly not to go to law school,” she says, and so she entered Hofstra University School of Law, graduating with honors. She completed Hofstra’s J.D. program in two years. She then started her own practice before she was lured away by the Federal Public Defender’s Office in 1994. “I never regretted that choice for a minute. It was a great 23 years.”