10-1-2008

International Fight: Law School Network Combats Domestic Violence Worldwide

UB Law Forum

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Two UB Law professors have taken steps to make the school a world-renowned center for confronting what they call the epidemic of domestic violence crimes, locally and internationally.

The professors, Isabel S. Marcus and Suzanne E. Tomkins, have used their teaching positions to coordinate a network of domestic violence advocacy that reaches from the classrooms of UB’s O’Brian Hall to at least two other continents.

“They have organized a network within the Law School of professors who share their passion for training professionals to address domestic abuse, cultivate advocacy for victims, improve the legal system’s response to domestic violence and support research on related subjects, such as women prisoners returning to society.”

“The issue of domestic violence is a very compelling one, and it has international as well as national and local dimensions,” says Marcus, who previously chaired UB’s Department of Women’s Studies and recently was named director of international programs at the Law School. “If you start thinking about it as a framing category for work and for thinking about the world, then you can find people who suddenly say, ‘That is a topic I should include in my studies.’

“Our work and advocacy are from the ground up,” she adds. “We’re all grass-roots people, so we all believe you do not take the structure from the top and then say, ‘How does everybody fit in?’”

The informal group is called “Domestic Violence: Different Voices.” Marcus and Tomkins said it is an extension of an overlapping domestic violence advocacy network – at UB, in Western New York and at the national and international levels.

“We’re growing our program at the Law School to include not only more U.S. lawyers, but also young attorneys from around the world interested in violence-against-women issues. We work with our colleagues from other countries and share ideas. In that process, our law students are exposed to issues and solutions from other parts of the world,” says Tomkins, who directs UB Law’s Women, Children and Social Justice Clinic.

“What we hope to accomplish

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eventually is to build a network made up of attorneys in the public sector and in the nongovernmental organization sector who then use their knowledge and skills in creating an effective response to domestic violence in other parts of the world.”

The list of related activities organized by UB Law School professors includes:

• The Women, Children and Social Justice Clinic. Students work in local service agencies, social service agencies, and prosecutor or legislative offices, and participate in a range of legal counseling, advocacy and research. The clinic also serves as a resource throughout New York, helping communities to create a coordinated response to domestic violence.

• The Domestic Violence Task Force, a volunteer organization open to UB Law students. Among the task force’s activities is an annual spa day for residents and clients of Haven House, a shelter for targets of domestic violence in Erie County.

• Development of a new eight-week certificate program for international prosecutors. Participants will take UB courses on domestic violence, as well as meet with local professionals dealing with domestic violence issues. Creation of the program follows the yearlong studies of Brazilian prosecutor Eduardo Machado, who came to UB last year to study strategies to increase the effectiveness of a recently adopted domestic violence law in Brazil.

• Tomkins traveled to Brazil in February for a series of presentations on domestic violence. An expected audience of several hundred people grew to 2,000, including legal professionals, law enforcement officials, medical providers, law faculty, students and people from the community. “The response was overwhelming,” Tomkins says. “I went to the women’s police stations, to the slums, and met with people from the community. Everywhere I went, people would be lined up to tell me their stories or ask me whether I was aware of how many women who were victims of domestic violence were killed in a particular area. It was clear to me that the country is poised to create significant change in its response to domestic violence.”

• Marcus has lectured extensively at Eastern European universities and has worked with nongovernmental organizations in that region. She established an International Visiting Scholar award for a women’s rights lawyer from the region, taking a salary reduction to help pay for the scholar to study domestic violence issues at the UB Law School. The lawyer, Maia Jaliashvili, 24, from the former Soviet republic of Georgia, was “absolutely exceptional,” Marcus says. Upon her return to Georgia, Jaliashvili began planning a domestic violence clinic in a law faculty in her country. It will be the first in Georgia and the first in the Caucasus region. Shortly after her arrival, she was asked to assist the prosecutor in representing a Peace Corps volunteer in Georgia who alleged that she was raped.

“Rape and domestic violence are very subversive topics in patriarchal societies like Georgia because they challenge the way in which the state handles the most common forms of crime against women – by ignoring, dismissing or minimizing them,” Marcus says. This year, Marcus is asking her colleagues at UB to contribute money to bring three women’s rights lawyers who work with nongovernmental organizations to the Law School as visiting scholars. They are from Azerbaijan and Poland.

“When you bring people together,” says Marcus, “the vision expands exponentially.”

“We really don’t let anything stop us,” adds Tomkins. “This has all been built by sheer determination.”
My experience at UB Law School

By Maia Jaliashvili

I am a lawyer working for a human rights watchdog organization – the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association in Tbilisi, Georgia. In an international competition I was awarded a domestic violence fellowship to spend four months at UB to expand my legal theoretical knowledge about domestic violence through participation in the UB Law School Family Violence Clinic and to apply that knowledge back in Georgia.

At UB Law, I took classes in domestic violence and in U.S. family law with widely recognized faculty experts in these fields in the United States. With the help of this qualified staff, I was given the chance to participate in the DV clinic, which was a great way to gain valuable practical experience. The clinic let me understand the problem as part of the whole system and learn ways of dealing with it from different perspectives.

For people like me, coming from developing countries that adopted DV law only a couple of years ago, this type of education is not only impressive, but priceless. In my country, all the lawyers working in this field are self-educated. This clinic experience is the perfect way to integrate domestic violence issues in legal education and raise the awareness of new generations about these issues. And this type of clinic makes a huge change in the development of civil society and shaping its way of thinking.

As a visiting scholar, I had the opportunity not only to attend classes, but also to observe the whole domestic violence intervention system in Buffalo and see how it works. To connect theory with practice, I also intensively observed the work of various officials and professionals in the family violence intervention system in Buffalo and Erie County. I have had access to social workers concerned with family violence as well as to judges and other personnel at the innovative Erie County Family Justice Center and the Integrated Domestic Violence Court. I also had a chance to visit a DV shelter in Buffalo, and I was very impressed with it.

The work done in the clinic is priceless, because there is a unique way of presenting your experience, sharing it with others and then discussing it in class that makes it so significant.

With the help of the remarkable staff of the DV clinic, I also had an opportunity to participate in DV activities around the state, attending meetings and conferences to talk in person with well-known experts in this field. The whole program was organized in such an effective way that I learned everything about DV in just four months.

I think this fellowship is a unique opportunity for a lawyer, and I am fortunate to have this opportunity. Maybe after I set up this kind of DV clinic in my country, I will feel more comfortable having finally achieved the primary goal of this fellowship.

Editor’s note: The late-summer conflict between Russia and the Republic of Georgia has added a level of uncertainty to Jaliashvili’s plans to open a domestic violence clinic in Georgia. Professors Isabel Marcus and Suzanne Tomkins have offered their assistance if needed.