

10-1-2020

The Innovators: Meet 10 UB School of Law alumni who use their law degrees to bring new ideas to life

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Recommended Citation

UB Law Forum (2020) "The Innovators: Meet 10 UB School of Law alumni who use their law degrees to bring new ideas to life," *UB Law Forum*: Vol. 33: No. 1, Article 9.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol33/iss1/9

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THE INNOVATORS

Historically, the path to a legal career was pretty straightforward: Go to law school, set up shop, practice law. Small firm, big firm, corporate, government, non-profit – the settings varied, but newly minted lawyers had a pathway firmly in sight.

All those options remain in place, and across the board, bright lawyers are reinventing how legal work is done in those traditional settings. UB School of Law graduates are no exception, working in dynamic ways whether at their own boutique firm or a multinational corporation.

But our alumni are taking the possibilities even further. They are running biotech startups, counseling clients and practitioners on digital marketing and their social media reach, connecting heavy hitters in business. Some of them are rethinking the whole paradigm that connects lawyers and clients.

Not surprisingly, many of the ventures they're involved in take full advantage of the wonders of modern communication technology, even branching out into advancements like artificial intelligence and cybersecurity. But at the heart of it, they're applying creative new approaches to time-honored skills: using their specialized training, their analytical expertise, their thirst for learning and their adventurous spirit to bring new ideas to life.

Read on as we pay a visit to 10 UB School of Law alumni who are bringing their innovative spirit to their life's work – and changing the world along the way.





Stephanie (Cole) Adams '99

A creative approach to serving creators

It was “midlife ambition,” Stephanie (Cole) Adams '99 says. “I knew if I wanted to build the kind of practice I could feel burgeoning in my brain, now was the time.”

The result: the human-centered, community-conscious law firm that bears her name on Buffalo's West Side.

Adams and her associates serve creators in the cultural world, from writers and designers to artists and building contractors. Many of their clients are members of the area's booming immigrant population.

But it's how they work that sets Adams' law office apart. It starts with their Grant Street building, which is heated and cooled with geothermal energy. They collaborated on designing the office space. “Our clients clearly are culturally sensitive,” Adams says. “The space we've designed is meant to be welcoming to people who want to create the world.”

Their thinking extends to how the work gets done. For example, Adams offers walking meetings as an alternative to sit-downs. “Sometimes when people are talking to an attorney something has made them upset, and walking is a way to channel the energy of that emotion,” she says.

“One of my goals is to make sure law and legal services are seen as enhancements to creativity and not a burden or an unnecessary impediment,” Adams says. “I work hard to listen to creative clients and hear what atmosphere they need to prosper, and then work to create that atmosphere.”

Adams' office recently won a \$25,000 grant from Ignite Buffalo to hire a support staff member from an underrepresented community – a fitting honor for a firm entrenched in a neighborhood that's remaking itself.

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Raad Ahmed '13

Easing the way for both clients and lawyers

In sixth grade, being disruptive could get you sent to the principal's office. For an entrepreneur like Raad Ahmed '13, it's a badge of honor.

Through his legal technology startup, LawTrades, Ahmed wants to do nothing less than change the way lawyers and clients find and work with each other. Launched in 2015, the company is a legal marketplace – it connects small businesses needing legal help with carefully screened attorneys who have the right expertise, then provides a chat platform, document storage, project management, billing and other web tools to make the virtual transaction seamless. (A companion business, LawTrades Apex, serves larger corporate clients.)

“We are trying to create a better user experience for someone looking for legal help,” Ahmed says. “And if you build software and tools that empower lawyers to service clients on their own, without needing a fancy office on Park Avenue, they can provide a much more affordable rate for clients yet keep more in their pocket and work fewer hours.”

Ahmed previously worked in legal aid and at the Texas Civil Rights Project, and says his background in human rights directed his thinking about how best to use his legal training.

“I've been obsessed with the idea of democratizing legal services and using technology to improve access for people,” he says. “I did it one-on-one, and then I learned about the true power of the Internet and how you could really reach hundreds of thousands of people. If you can disseminate information and make law and legal services easily digestible for people, you can really change people's lives.”

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Jennifer Beckage '07

Making data security a reality

Before law school Jennifer Beckage '07 flourished as an entrepreneur, owning and running a successful technology business and helping to lead its sale to a publicly traded company. So when she founded Beckage PLLC in 2018, she understood, more than most, the importance of providing clients with practical legal advice on data privacy and data security issues.

Now her law firm does everything from helping global companies with regulatory compliance, managing their tech vendors and setting up incident response procedures, to being on call in a crisis, even to representing companies in subsequent litigation.

"We're extraordinarily passionate about privacy and technology and its intersection with the law, which is the sole focus of our practice," says Beckage, whose firm employs experienced attorneys, technologists and other staff, and has offices in Buffalo and New York City. "The legal landscape is changing very quickly, and there are a host of international and national regulations on privacy issues. We keep up with these regulations and laws so we can let clients know what we are seeing and help them navigate it.

It's a niche specialization that's growing rapidly, bolstered by recent high-profile data breaches and the complex regulatory environment around information security and privacy. And Beckage says tech issues can't be separated from the rest of a business's operations.

"Technology is baked into almost every type of organization. We all rely on some software or hardware on an hourly basis these days," she says. "It's not just about data security incidents, it's about operational process. You've got to be able to be a sponge and take it all in – not just reacting to immediate needs but asking, what are your clients going to need five or 10 years from now?"

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Adrian Dayton '08

A new wave in legal marketing

The first client Adrian Dayton '08 ever brought into his law firm, he found on Twitter.

The social network was in its infancy back then, and Dayton was surprised to read a tweet from someone seeking a contract lawyer. "That was a light bulb moment for me," he says. "I was the only lawyer who responded. **I realized there was an entire market out there that was accessible through Twitter and no one even knew it existed.**"

After losing his job at a major law firm in Buffalo, Dayton struck out on his own with a new mission: to help firms tap the potential of this new wave of social media to grow their business. He became a consultant and trainer on the subject, traveled widely and has trained more than 17,000 professionals in social media and business development.

In 2013, Dayton launched a company to help firms leverage that reach. ClearView Social, with offices in Buffalo and Salt Lake City, Utah, uses proprietary software to make it easy for firms' marketing directors to get their lawyers' content in front of more eyeballs. Concentrating on LinkedIn, the business-focused social network, ClearView Social extends firms' reach by sharing content – blog posts, white papers and the like – with not only the firms' marketing lists but with the networks of their individual lawyers.

"Ten to 15 percent of the lawyers at any given firm do this kind of writing," Dayton says. "But once that content is created, they're not always great about sharing it. We can help them reach dramatically more people."

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Minara El-Rahman '08

Creating her own path

Minara El-Rahman has been blogging almost since blogging first became a thing. She was a public relations and marketing manager for a footwear company before she decided to go law school – realizing, she says, that the law is integral to protecting the work of creative people.

As a third-year UB School of Law student, she asked her professor in an intellectual property law class to let her create a fashion law blog instead of writing yet another paper. That experience led El-Rahman into a series of cutting-edge jobs in digital media and marketing, starting when she moved to San Francisco and did pioneering work in social media for Thompson Reuters and FindLaw.

She has worked for startups and a construction manufacturer, did digital marketing for a university, and now serves as digital marketing lead for EyeQue Corp., a young company that is developing affordable, high-quality vision tests for use at home.

For more than a decade, she also has maintained the popular blog Hijabi Life, aimed at Muslim women who choose to wear the traditional religious head covering. It combines her first passion, fashion, with lifestyle tips and discussion around beauty, food, parenting, relationships – and, as El-Rahman puts it, “how to be a dignified Muslim in America.”

One thing she learned at UB School of Law, she says, was how to write well: **“Law school teaches you to write clearly and succinctly, in a way that’s easy to understand. And that’s exactly what digital writing is. I still use all those tools.”**

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Hon. Craig Hannah '95

Creative thinking from the bench

Every judge knows there’s a fine line between justice and mercy. From his seat on Buffalo City Court, Hon. Craig Hannah '95 walks that line every day.

Hannah was recently named the city’s chief judge, becoming the senior jurist among the City Court’s 14 judges. But his first-in-the-nation Opioid Intervention Court, created in 2017, is perhaps his highest-profile innovation.

The court takes non-violent offenders who are addicted to opioid drugs and helps them to turn things around. As presiding judge, Hannah played tough-love parent, seeing “clients” – his word for them – in court over a period of months as they went through drug rehab and stabilized their lives. The result: fewer petty thieves in expensive prisons, more lives and families made whole.

“We treat our opioid clients as family. Most of these individuals have burned every bridge they have,” Hannah says. “Our job is to instill hope and get them back on track – getting in the habit of doing well, getting up early, going to work. We give them the support they need, and if they’re off the beaten path, I have to put my foot in their butt, too.”

The approach has reduced recidivism and changed lives, and the world has noticed. After national media attention, Hannah has been in regular contact with other judges nationwide looking to adopt his model.

“We wanted to create something that other people could replicate, and they can cherry-pick the parts they can use,” he says. “We want to spread this, and if it’s helpful to you, use what you can.”

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Vikki Pryor '78

Helping leaders to connect

By the time she started her leadership development company, Change Create Transform, in 2011, Vikki Pryor '78 had done several things: worked as a government tax attorney, held senior positions in the insurance industry, served on a series of high-profile boards. She had wisdom to share about how executives can make their companies work better.

She also knew that magic happens when people engage each other. So she built her New York City-based company on a web platform that enables members to share ideas and counsel from their own experience.

"People are redefining how they work, when they work, what work means to them," Pryor says. **"Our members are part of a community – they can work on their personal and professional development, they can network with others, they can do business development. It allows the person who is a member to curate their own experience."**

The company also provides business consulting and coaching, and sponsors leadership retreats, seminars and trainings.

A parallel philanthropic effort, the Create Change Transform Foundation, works with universities nationwide (including UB School of Law) to provide scholarship support and leadership training for promising students. The program now has more than 100 alumni, Promise Prize® Scholars, all of whom have committed to lifetime involvement in the foundation and its ideals of service.

"Leadership focuses on seeing the whole person, and what we all have in common," Pryor says. "We want our scholars to bring their values, skills, care, concern and compassion for people to whatever they do, wherever they are."

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Jonathan Smyth '15

A cutting edge in cancer care

Jonathan Smyth '15 knows a good idea when he sees one. Smyth was an innovation assistant in UB's technology transfer office, and in his final year at UB School of Law, when he recognized a new concept for cancer treatment with tremendous potential. A graduate student in biomedical engineering, along with his professor, had developed a novel platform for delivering chemotherapy drugs directly to the patient's tumor. The drugs are activated when light is applied – targeting the cancer while minimizing the harsh side effects of traditional chemo.

Smyth joined forces with the developer and their team won first place in UB's Panasci Technology Entrepreneurship Competition. Now the company they founded, POP Biotechnologies, is going through the rigorous process that they hope will lead to regulatory approval for the platform.

"I don't know if I need to be an attorney to do what I'm doing now, but it certainly helps," says Smyth, whose role includes overall business management, recordkeeping, grant writing and investor relations. And, of course, there are lots of legal issues in this highly regulated sector of industry, including patent and contract matters. "There's plenty of legal work to be done," he says. Smyth also wrote the company's business plan and often acts as spokesman in public-facing situations.

In addition to targeted chemotherapy, the drug delivery platform also shows promise for creating more effective vaccines. The science is daunting, but it's Smyth's job to present it in an understandable way. "I'm not a scientist," he says, "but being able to write effectively is tremendously helpful."

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Jordan Walbesser '10

Leading the way for next-generation tech

There's a concept in the electronics industry called "future-proofing" – the challenge of designing a product that will hold up even as technology evolves.

It's something Jordan Walbesser '10 thinks about, too, in his work as in-house counsel for Mattel Inc., the toy industry giant.

"For me, what's interesting is that the technology far outpaces the law, and it requires flexibility and forethought and risk tolerance," he says. "You're trying to draft something or create a deal today that's going to hold up in the future. And so it's really important for an attorney like me to be on the bleeding edge of what's happening in technology."

Working out of Mattel's Fisher-Price subsidiary in East Aurora, N.Y., Walbesser is part of a worldwide in-house counsel group. His particular niche is emerging technologies, such as software and new media, and he deals with everyone from established companies to indie inventors, creating the contracts involved, among other complex legal tasks.

"I joke with friends that I'm a toy lawyer. A video games and monster truck attorney," he says. But there are serious issues involved, especially around protecting the privacy of Mattel's young customers. "I love my job," he says. "No deal is the same."

Walbesser also is active in Western New York's entrepreneurial community, and with a friend won Buffalo's inaugural Civic Innovation Challenge. Together they created a phone app that gives citizens one-touch access to information about services offered by the city, county, state and non-profits. With Google Translate built in, it's especially useful for Buffalo's burgeoning immigrant population.

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Nate Yohannes '12

On the front lines of artificial intelligence

Nate Yohannes '12 was in California when he found himself, through a mix-up, riding in an Uber with a Microsoft human resources executive. They got to talking. And soon after that, he was working for the company.

Good luck? Maybe. But Yohannes says it's more about recognizing opportunities, leaning into them – "and then betting on yourself."

As director of corporate business development and strategy for Microsoft Artificial Intelligence, he led engagements pertaining to partnerships and M&A for the engineering team that builds products involving computer vision, mixed reality and conversational AI. "I would recommend companies to invest in to our venture capital team. Our job is to go out and find ecosystem partners to work with."

Now the principal product leader for Microsoft's AI and mixed reality engineering group, he's in the front row watching artificial intelligence come into its own, with products such as smart cameras, facial recognition and holographic technology. One recent project involves a "mixed reality" headset called HoloLens that's used in fields like advanced manufacturing and surgery.

"In AI, we're so early in the technology that often this is the first time a contract has been written that addresses it," Yohannes says. "Everything I do is brand-new. You have cameras analyzing society, devices that listen to you and analyze and try to make your life more productive. Frankly, I'm working with some of the most controversial technology in the world."

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