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Building Knowledge, Piece by Piece

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Building knowledge, piece by piece

“**P**hilosophy is thinking in slow motion.” The formula may not have originated with **Matthew Steilen’s** Ph.D. adviser, but it has rung true for Steilen through his study of philosophy – and on through Stanford Law School and a legal career.

Steilen, who joins the UB Law faculty this fall, has done some thinking in his time. A Minnesota native, he earned his bachelor’s degree in philosophy, magna cum laude, at that state’s Carleton College, then went on to a doctoral program in philosophy at Northwestern University. Following law school at Stanford and a federal appellate clerkship, he has worked in litigation at the San Francisco office of the Washington, D.C., law firm Covington & Burling.

Steilen found himself drawn to philosophy, he says, because it indulges his love of intellectual puzzles. “Sometimes you believe you understand something about the world,” he says, “and when you slow down and examine why it is you’ve come to the conclusion you’ve come to, everything starts to fall apart. For people who enjoy intellectual inquiry and the life of the mind, that feeling of exploring something you thought you understood so well is really enjoyable.”

Steilen says when he was ready to make the leap from practice into legal teaching, he was drawn to UB Law’s reputation as a place that values interdisciplinary scholarship. It was evident, he says, when he delivered a candidate paper that was “more philosophical than it was typical legal scholarship. The people who were there ate it up. The level of engagement with the substance of my talk and with my broader set of interests was phenomenal. It’s going to be a great place to start



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– Associate Professor
Matthew Steilen

my career as a teacher.”

Or continue it, actually. Steilen was an active teaching assistant at Northwestern, and worked to train other TAs in classroom techniques.

“I really enjoy teaching,” says Steilen, whose initial courses will be in Constitutional law and civil procedure. “It’s very different from practice. When you’re providing a service to a paying client, you have to move quickly. There’s not time to re-create the foundations of the law from the ground up. In teaching, I know where I want to go and I figure out a series of steps, and I can draw out of students

their views on certain aspects of the subject and keep them moving in the direction I want them to move.”

Not that it’s always comfortable, he acknowledges. “One thing that law schools should do for students, whatever their skill set, is to push them a little bit,” Steilen says. “If you’re not working on developing the suite of skills you come with, law school is doing you a disservice.”

His legal experience bears that out. As law clerk to Hon. Kermit V. Lipez of the U.S. Court of Appeals, First Circuit, in Portland, Maine, he learned a lot by “seeing the judge wrestle through how to resolve a case and really do his best to treat the parties fairly and spend significant time understanding the factual basis of the case and the law.”

At Covington & Burling, Steilen worked on two large cases: helping to represent BP in its effort to obtain insurance coverage for losses arising out of the Deepwater Horizon accident, and representing plaintiffs pro bono in a case alleging racial discrimination by Maricopa County, Ariz., Sheriff Joseph Arpaio.

The professor and his wife, Kate Hasler Steilen, a fiction writer, have a 14-month-old daughter, Willa. He says they’re looking forward to doing some hiking in the area and, because they love the outdoors, are glad to be back in four-seasons territory.