

Charlotte Law School Dean Hits The Ground Running

By Susan Shackelford, North Carolina Lawyers Weekly

If moving halfway around the world weren't enough, the dean of the new Charlotte School of Law has found himself in another type of time warp since arriving in Charlotte in mid-January.

"It seems like two months or a year some days," says Dr. E. Eugene "Gene" Clark, "but it's only the end of the second week."

Clark, whose last position was executive dean at Charles Darwin University in northern Australia, is hoofing it around the state as the school prepares to open in August 2006. Back in his office on the 16th floor of the Odell Building in uptown Charlotte, he's been pleased with the response.

"My impression is it's all bright green — in terms of the reception, the interest and the support from everybody, whether it's the [Charlotte] Chamber, the judiciary or the North Carolina Bar Association," says Clark, whose accent is tinged with a bit of Down Under. "All the other law deans have been much welcoming. I've been invited to visit their universities, and I've met Chief Justice Lake."

Such high-level networking is a major agenda item for Clark, whose school is owned by the InfiLaw Consortium of Independent Law Schools and is the first for-profit law school in North Carolina. That will "raise some eyebrows in certain circles as well as the folks who are running it — they are not Charlotteans and they are trying to establish themselves," says Shirley Fulton, a former state Superior Court judge who chairs the school's board of trustees, and is a partner in Tin, Fulton, Greene & Owen in Charlotte.

"Gene's background having been in education and administration for more than 20 years, both in the United States and Australia, is going to serve him well," Fulton says. "He has hit the ground running."

A rapid talker with a professorial bearing — spectacles and graying hair over his collar — Clark easily fields questions about the credibility of a for-profit school. He points to the bar-exam success of the first InfiLaw school in Jacksonville, Fla. and addresses funding philosophically.

"We look not so much at the source of the capital as the quality of what you produce," he says. "Even a private institution will have mostly private capital.... These days there are very few state-funded universities; they are state-supported universities, with more than 50 percent of their capital coming from private sources.

"We also think it's a huge plus that we're contributing a great deal of capital, expertise and dollars, and bringing in lots of people into Charlotte without asking taxpayers to in any way contribute," he says. "The emphasis is on achieving the highest possible

quality we can, and the issue of profit will be a by-product of really doing an excellent job with our students."

In addition to selling the concept of the school, Clark's big orders of the day are: finalizing a location, helping select the faculty, overseeing the admissions process, helping establish the curriculum and ensuring the school is ABA-accredited as soon as possible.

He expects to announce the school site at the end of February.

The school is looking for about 50,000 square feet.

"I'm promoting close to the center city, but the site is up in the air because of a financial perspective," Fulton says. "Prices are higher uptown. We're also looking close to I-77. One location is close to the old arena on Tyvola Road."

In recruiting faculty, Clark has been gratified at the response.

"We've been a bit overwhelmed by the strength of our faculty applications," he says. "We will be announcing the faculty probably in the next four to six weeks. We have received applications from universities all over, including some of the top schools in the world, such as Oxford, Yale and Harvard."

But having the proper credentials is not enough to land a position, Clark says.

"We have to get the right fit — faculty members select us as much as we select them.... If they want to do their own thing and only think about their next article, and see teaching as a nuisance between publications, obviously we're not the right place.... We have an intense focus on students and putting them at the center of everything we do."

The school is working with the firm IDEO to design its space to reflect the student-centered approach. In addition to traditional classrooms, "we'll have a knowledge bar, where a professor can meet in a bar-type setting with four or five students going over a particular problem," Clark says.

"Another may be a family-room setting ... or a front-porch setting. We're also putting a lot of attention on where we put our faculty. We don't want them hidden in a bunker or up on a floor so the students don't where they are."

School officials say they've received 600 applications from 44 states, with 52 percent of the applicants from outside North Carolina.

"A majority of our applications are from the region — North Carolina, South Carolina and other southeastern states," says Sharon R. Shaw, public relations specialist with the school. "We've also had considerable interest from the Northeast corridor, including New York."

Clark expects 50 to 70 in the first class.

"We want to put a lot of emphasis on the quality," he says. "We've made it clear that we intend to be professionalism with a capital 'P.' It's not fair to students or the profession to take a student who is absolutely going to struggle."

The school is eager to enroll minority students. Calling it "inclusive excellence," Clark points to the track record at the InfiLaw site in Florida as proof.

"They not only have the highest bar passing rate in the state, but students of diverse backgrounds have scored as well on the exam as other students," he says.

Fulton, who is African American, says the commitment to assist minorities was one of the reasons she agreed to serve on the school's local board. "In conventional law schools, you're sort of thrown in there and it's sink or swim," she says. "They will consider students who may otherwise never have attended law school — which may mean offering those students additional resources so they can become successful." Such resources include scholarships and tutoring.

The school also emphasizes grooming graduates who can step into a law firm and function as if he or she were a second-year associate.

"That means we'll have a strong emphasis on skills and development," Clark says. "We will be mapping a developmental approach to that skill education all the way throughout the degree."

He also will require faculty members to be actively involved with the North Carolina Bar Association. "We want to stay regularly in touch with what practices are doing."

Clark also anticipates weaving international law throughout the curriculum, including taking advantage of international programs at its sister schools.

Though he may be a bit bleary-eyed from the pace he's been keeping, he already has a clear picture of what one of the school's specialties likely will be.

"A banking/finance specialization is likely to evolve," Clark says, having absorbed the significance of that to the Queen City. "We will be looking for a niche in that regard."

Dean Gene Clark: From Kansas To Oz

Gene Clark, the dean of the new Charlotte School of Law, has spent most of his legal and educational career in Australia.

Most recently as executive dean at Charles Darwin University, Clark oversaw the law, business, arts and tourism/hospitality faculties at the school, functioning much like a provost does in this country.

A native of Wichita, Kan., he was also a law professor at Darwin, located in the Northern Territory near Indonesia.

Before that, he was the second law professor hired at the new University of Canberra law school in 1994. Later, he served as dean of the law school during two periods, 1995-1997 and 2003-2004. The school is in the nation's capital, located in the southeast portion of the country.

He also served as Canberra's pro vice chancellor from 1998-2003, a position similar to provost or vice chancellor in American universities.

Clark has both American and Australian degrees in law and education (master degrees). He earned his American law degree from Washburn University in Topeka, Kan. in 1978, making the law review and graduating in the top 5 percent of his class. His Australian law degree came from the University of Tasmania in 1993.

Clark, who turns 58 on April 15, became enamored of Australia when he was at Washburn.

"My best friend in law school was an Australian," he recalled. "I was on the moot court team with him. I met his relatives and saw photos."

After law school, Clark visited Australia and practiced at legal aid for a year in his hometown of Wichita. He then spent two years in commercial law at Foulston Siefkin, also based there. He made his way back to Australia in 1983 as deputy principal of a high school, eventually shifting into law and working in Australia until the Charlotte School of Law opportunity came along.

Clark and his wife Pat have two daughters — Lisa, 18, a freshman at Montana State on tennis scholarship; and Remy, 21, who played tennis on scholarship at Montana State for two years. This semester, Remy is studying abroad at the University of Canberra, her father's old stomping ground as law school dean.