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Law school nears reality

Dean discusses plans, philosophy for campus

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Eugene Clark, inaugural dean of the Charlotte School of Law, said the city's first bricks-and-mortar law school will announce the location of its new campus by month's end.

Clark, a Kansas native, arrived in Charlotte via Darwin, Australia, a port city in the Northern Territory. The veteran law dean and professor possesses five degrees, including a doctorate from the University of Tasmania in Australia.

The verbose and peripatetic academic says Charlotte's new school, which is still hiring faculty, will focus on real-world legal applications and produce "practice-ready" lawyers. Classes begin this fall.

Clark recently discussed with the Observer his aspirations for the school.

Questions and answers were edited for clarity.

Q. Other universities have talked about opening a law school in Charlotte. You swoop in as part of a for-profit operation. What kind of reception have you received?

I've met all the other law school deans in North Carolina and I have to say, without exception, I was warmly welcomed. They were relieved to know that what we're about is quality. Our model is not one of inclusive mediocrity, where almost anybody can sit through our program in hopes that they might scrape by. Our record is quite the opposite, if you look at the success rate of those who have passed the bar at (InfiLaw's flagship campus) Florida Coastal School of Law in Jacksonville, Fla.

Q. What is your school's model, its mission?

Our basic mission is three-fold: Produce practice-ready lawyers; be student-centric in everything we do; and serve the needs of the under-served.

This will be in contrast to the model that exists in many of the Harvard wanna-be universities, where the focus is largely on academics and particularly on research. That's a pretty egocentric model where student issues are not always the top ones on the agenda.

In our case, even the design of the teaching space will focus very much on students. We don't want to have our professors hidden away. Their offices will be close by. We'll have knowledge bars outside classrooms -- a bar-type setting where professors can engage with students.

Q. Sounds pretty ambitious considering you don't even have a building to house the school yet. How will you pull this off?

We're not dealing with a blank slate. We have experience with operating law schools in Florida and Phoenix. We think big, and start with small steps. What you're really talking about is capital. Through corporate parent InfiLaw, you have the intellectual capital, financial capital and business-knowledge capital. Yes, it's ambitious. But it's also well planned, well coordinated and we are on track and moving rapidly.

Q. On what areas of law will the school concentrate?

Obviously banking is one. But at the same time I realize there is a significant banking law presence at UNC

Chapel Hill. We don't want to duplicate what other people are doing. Certainly we'll look at community development. Sports law is interesting as well. But rather than us presume what Charlotte needs, once we get our faculty on board, we will engage in the community and then we will determine what our unique contribution will be.

Q. To what extent will the school accommodate working professionals looking to get a law degree?

We're going to have a full- and part-time day program, and a part-time evening program. We may have two summer sessions so that even a part-time person can get through in a fairly prompt time. And we're asking students for feedback on what time of day is best to start.

Q. What about scholarships?

We'll be putting a significant amount of our tuition back into scholarships. InfiLaw also will fund scholarships.

Who's On Board

Charlotte School of Law Board of Trustees • Shirley Fulton (chairwoman), retired N.C. Superior Court judge and partner in the law firm Tin, Fulton, Greene and Owen in Charlotte.

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- Richard Matasar, dean and president and professor of law at New York Law School.
- Arthur Gallagher, president of Johnson & Wales University Charlotte campus.
- Johnny Taylor Jr., senior vice president of human resources at Lending Tree LLC in Charlotte.

InfiLaw's 3rd Site

Charlotte School of Law will be the third campus in the InfiLaw System, a for-profit consortium of independent law schools. InfiLaw includes Florida Coastal School of Law in Jacksonville, Fla., which opened in 1996, and Phoenix International School of Law in Arizona, which opened last year.

Source: InfiLaw System