

Charlotte's New Legal Beagle

By Ellison Clary

Filling underserved needs is a high priority at the new Charlotte School of Law, a for-profit institution with a pragmatic approach to teaching and learning.

Dean E. Eugene ("Gene") Clark, who signed on with the school in late 2005, left Australia for Charlotte and the school, which welcomed its first students this past August. He sees unmet legal education needs in Charlotte, and to address those needs, he likes the teaching model of the Charlotte School of Law.

"What excites me," says Clark, "is a legal education that is extremely student-centered. It is based on outcomes, and we will be judged by the outcomes we produce in the lives of our students, which includes not only success in law school, not only a high bar passage rate, but also a fulfilling career afterwards."

Before arriving in Charlotte, the Kansas-born Clark was executive dean of the Faculty of Law, Business and Arts at Charles Darwin University in Australia's Northern Territory. This involved leadership of four schools (including law) across six campuses. He forged a 30-year education career in the Land Down Under.

His wife Pat has long-established roots in North Carolina, however. Her mother was a tribal member of the Cherokee Nation and her family was among the Cherokees that were moved from the Blue Ridge Mountains to an Oklahoma reservation.

Clark is practical in his vision for this new institution: He hopes they can address the gaps between what prospective lawyers learn in class and what they are expected to know once they begin practicing.

"We're making a far more serious commitment to skills and to comprehensive professional development," Clark says, "and it's really a professional degree compared to the traditional model."

By reaching out to underserved populations, Clark means for Charlotte School of Law to offer this type of education to those who might not otherwise have access to it. In its inaugural class, 18 percent of Charlotte School of Law's students are people of color.

The focus on an underserved population reflects an emphasis of The InfiLaw System, the parent company of Charlotte School of Law, as well as sister campuses Phoenix School of Law and Florida Coastal School of Law in Jacksonville, Fla. Now a decade old and accredited by the American Bar Association, Florida Coastal has become the nation's only law school where minority students have outperformed those of the majority on the state bar exam.

Based in Naples, Fla., InfiLaw's chief executive Rick Inatome is managing director of Sterling Partners, a \$300 million private equity fund. A technology industry pioneer, Inatome founded a computer company as a 17-year-old and, in a decade, transformed it into Inacom, a Fortune 500 firm with approximately 20,000 employees. He is a champion of bringing minorities into the American business mainstream.

Ensnconced in a Georgian-style building on East Morehead Street, Charlotte School of Law has already begun serving a city and region that Clark views as underserved. Until this new campus opened, Charlotte was the largest city in the United States without a law school. North Carolina is the 48th state in number of lawyers per capita and South Carolina ranks last.

The new law school occupies 33,600 square feet in the three-story Morehead Street structure that had been home to legal firms for decades. It also operates classrooms in 10,000 square feet of a building on Harding Place, a block away. Total employment is 40, including 12 lawyers on staff and six full-time faculty. Clark expects the faculty to double for next fall.

Meanwhile, in another non-traditional move, Charlotte School of Law will accept approximately 20 more students for admission this month.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for December college graduates or for people who don't want to wait until August," says Victoria Taylor Carter, assistant dean of admissions. A Greensboro native who graduated from the North Carolina Central University School of Law in Durham, Taylor Carter came to the new Charlotte school after working in human resources handling employee matters for Wachovia, a stone's throw away in center city.

Class Begins

Taylor Carter offers a catalogue of statistics on the school and its students. It received 1,010 applications for the first class. They came from 46 states. The school accepted 420 and a bit fewer than half of those sent in seat deposits. That ultimately produced 85 students for the initial class, with some from as far away as Hawaii and Maine.

A full 75 percent come from the Greater Charlotte region. In the full-time program, 48 percent are men and 52 percent women, and their average age is 27 or 28. Of 18 part-timers, 55 percent are men. Overall, students' ages range from 21 to 48.

Tuition is \$26,900 for full-time and \$21,700 part-time. Clark calls that roughly equivalent to out-of-state tuition at UNC Chapel Hill, and Taylor Carter adds that financial help is readily available. About half the first class gets financial aid through loans or scholarships.

"We've got a very generous merit scholar program," she says, "and wonderful lenders that we work with. We have a nice partnership with Wachovia for folks to look at some other creative financing."

She believes attrition will be low, partly because of a strong academic support program that recognizes differences in learning styles. The school soon will add a career services director to help students find summer work as well as post-graduation employment.

Provisional ABA Accreditation takes 24 to 36 months, Taylor Carter says, adding that the school is working hard to make that happen before the first class graduates in 2009. A team from the American Bar Association will visit the school in fall 2007. ABA provisional



Victoria Taylor Carter, Assistant Dean of Admissions
E. Eugene Clark, Dean and Professor of Law

approval by spring 2008 is the school's goal, with full approval targeted for 2010. Students who graduate from a provisionally accredited law school are entitled to sit for the bar exam.

And why would an employer consider a Charlotte School of Law grad? Taylor Carter has a ready response.

"Our inaugural class, they're part of something that isn't an established shop," she says. "They're willing to take the risk and join us in this journey. These are the kind of folks that are going to be bulldogs. They're not afraid of work."

Indeed, Adam Bridgers says he picked Charlotte School of Law partly because he likes the Queen City and also because he's not averse to risk. From the Wilmington area, Bridgers was student body vice president in his junior year at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte where he graduated with a bachelor's in political science in May 2006.

Risk a Success Factor

"You look at individuals in American society that we consider successful and what's one common factor?" Bridgers asks. "It's risk. A key to success is risk-taking. Look at Bill Gates and people like that. It is taking a risk to be at a new school, but I believe it's a healthy risk."

Dean Clark, 58, is no stranger to risk, having left the predictable life of a Kansas attorney to teach in Australia. He acknowledges the entrepreneurial spirit of the school's first class and adds that the legal education the school offers is focused on outcomes in students' lives.

He thinks another attraction is the quality of people associated with the school. Its board includes Burley Mitchell, retired chief justice of the N.C. Supreme Court, and is chaired by Shirley Fulton, a former N.C. Superior Court judge.

Art Gallagher, president of the Charlotte campus of Johnson & Wales University, says he joined the school's board because he was impressed with its leadership, student-centered approach and commitment to serve the underserved. "The core values at Charlotte School of Law are similar to those at Johnson & Wales University," he says.

Clark values advice Gallagher shared. "If you have a commitment to the community, you will get rewarded ten-fold," Gallagher told him. "The community has welcomed the school," Clark says, "and that has reinforced our desire and commitment to be part of the community."

Charlotte School of Law won't turn a profit for at least seven years, Clark says, but it is contributing to the Charlotte region in many ways already. Not the least of these is developing people who will add value to companies and organizations, regardless of whether their core function is the law.

"The law degree is becoming akin to a premiere master's of business administration degree," Clark says, adding that banks are among the biggest hirers of attorneys these days because of the heavily regulated environment in which they operate. "Training in law develops conceptual thinking, and argumentative and other skills that are of the highest order," he adds.

An Image That Will Grow

Asked about the longer term future for Charlotte School of Law, Clark points to a greeting card he plans to send to one of his two daughters, both of whom are on tennis scholarships at Montana State University. It pictures a housecat staring into a mirror and seeing the image of a male lion.

"We will be a law school highly regarded by its students and employers," he says. Students will be helping with legal aid, working part-time in government and in various law firms.

"We will be deeply embedded in the region," he continues in painting his view of a decade from now. "Our faculty will contribute to innovation in Charlotte. We are adding value, bringing people in and creating jobs. We will have invested millions of dollars in the Charlotte community."

He expects the school will find larger quarters in two or three years.

Clark would be open to cooperating with area schools, such as UNC Charlotte and Queens University of Charlotte, to give their M.B.A. students an opportunity to combine that degree with a Juris Doctor from Charlotte School of Law. He might even consider a law school partnership with either campus.

"We're going to be successful in our own right," he says, "but we would be open and responsive if there is a value proposition that is good for both organizations."

But for now, Clark concentrates on producing quality graduates. Re-emphasizing a commitment to teaching, Clark says Charlotte School of Law administers a rarity—a mid-term exam. Further, professors sit down with students and give feedback on their graded papers. Every student must have a personal laptop computer. Classrooms and gathering spots are festooned with electric sockets.

Each graduate will have built an electronic portfolio and will be able to show a prospective employer a compact disc that includes writing samples and excerpts from making a mock argument.

"We're big on evidence," Clark says. "We're not based on anecdotes."

Charlotte School of Law, LLC

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Principal: E. Eugene ("Gene") Clark, Dean; Victoria Taylor Carter, Assistant Dean of Admissions

Parent: The InfiLaw System, Naples, Florida; CEO Rick Inatome

Employees: 40

Established: 2004; first class August 2006

Initial Enrollment: 85

Additional Campuses: Florida Coastal School of Law, Jacksonville, Fla.; Phoenix School of Law, Phoenix, Ariz.

Business: Part of a consortium of independent, community-based, for-profit law schools endeavoring to make legal education more responsive to the changing legal profession, with a mission is to establish student-centered, American Bar Association-accredited law schools in underserved markets graduating students with the skills of second-year law professionals.

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Ellison Clary is a Charlotte-based freelance writer.

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