

Why I Teach



MARY BUTKUS

I DIDN'T GO TO LAW SCHOOL TO BECOME A LAWYER. I went to law school because I didn't know what I wanted to do after college. At Grinnell, I had majored in history and thought that the only career I could pursue in history was teaching. If there was any occupation I had ruled out, it was teaching. Law school thus was a way to push the decision off for three years, while acquiring an education that would be useful in any number of productive careers. That it carried a deferment from the draft at a time the country was escalating its activity in Vietnam was a not-so-coincidental bonus.

As it turned out, I thrived in law school. I found the experience very challenging and stimulating—the most exciting educational process I had ever encountered. Studying law was, if you will, one big jigsaw puzzle, and I couldn't get enough of

it. Except for one little thing: I trembled at the thought of being called on. I wouldn't dream of raising my hand, I usually sat in the back, and I tried to hide behind those in the rows in front of me. With that little exception, I loved everything about my first couple of years at Texas. From my teachers, I learned precise thinking; from my law review experience, I learned precise writing. And I really enjoyed the writing—much more than I had enjoyed producing the numerous essays and papers that I had to write at Grinnell.

I started looking forward to a career practicing law, and I lined up a summer job with a large Chicago firm. Then, late in my second year, I realized that my teachers had a very interesting career. They got to educate aspiring lawyers, and they got to pursue their scholarly interests to the point of exhaustion, without the kind of deadlines the law review imposed on me. And after my summer in Chicago, I understood that the time pressure exerted by the law review was nothing compared to the need for speed when a client awaits the answer. The idea of a career in teaching continued to grow, and I was fortunate to be offered the opportunity to teach here.

THAT'S HOW I GOT HERE. Why am I still here?

That's easy: I love it. I love the teaching, I love the law school, and I love Washington University.

When I arrived, I was the 14th person on the faculty. My law school mentors had told me that the faculty at Washington University were outstanding teachers and scholars, extremely collegial, and helpful. They were absolutely correct. My colleagues here were incredibly supportive, available at all times to help with questions about teaching and scholarship. And they still are.

But what really sustains me are the interactions with students. I love working with the newly arrived first-year students in *Contracts*, introducing them to the methodology of the common law, helping them master case analysis, and improving their reasoning skills. It is alien to their prior experience to distill the story of a dispute down to its relevant facts, discarding information that is interesting, but not essential to the resolution of the dispute. It is alien also to have to capture the essence of a situ-

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ation in the form of a precise question that has to be resolved. And few have engaged in the precise analysis that we call legal reasoning. No other intellectual activity compares to the stimulation of generating questions to enable a struggling student to take a progression of steps that enable him or her to arrive at an appropriate analysis of a court’s opinion or a legal doctrine. Developing hypotheticals, on the fly, to provide the key to the puzzle, is hard work. But it’s very rewarding work. The progress of the students between the day they first walk into class and the day of the last exam is amazing. To have a role in that progress provides tremendous satisfaction and pride.

The progress, of course, continues in upper-level courses, where my focus is helping the students develop the skills of statutory analysis. In addition to the substantive challenge, there is the challenge of engaging the interest of students for whom the law school experience is no longer fresh. I think that is why my scholarship in recent years has focused primarily on producing teaching materials for my upper-level courses.

FORTUNATELY, TEACHING is not confined to the classroom. I am pleased when students approach me outside of class, to clarify matters about which they are uncertain, or even better, to probe questions more deeply than we did in class. At these times, new teaching opportunities arise, and the Socratic dialog can

continue, without the anxiety on the student’s part of performing in front of others and without the concern on my part for time management in the classroom.

These are things that occur on a daily basis that explain why I continue teaching. But other aspects of teaching are very rewarding, too. I take great pleasure in seeing the activities and accomplishments of my students after they graduate, seeing them achieve positions of responsibility in their jobs and in their communities. I take pride in having played an admittedly small role in the development of the ability that helped them make those contributions.

Another part of the rewards of teaching is the personal contact after graduation. One of the most touching kinds of contact is the letter from a student from many years before, affirming the value of the experience in *Contracts*, even though he or she didn’t appreciate it so much at the time. Another—the best—is the friendship that begins in the classroom and continues after the semester and, indeed, after graduation.

And every fall it begins again. I have found the fountain of youth, and I am blessed. ■■■

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A first-year law student who was unprepared for class created a T-shirt to wear the next time the class met with the slogan “Book Briefs Destroy Lives.”



Professor Michael Greenfield found humor in his student’s “loving” apology and appreciated the learning opportunity it provided.