The Class of 2000

Four graduates reflect the diversity of the School of Law’s newest alumni.

by Candace O’Connor

Last academic year the School of Law gained 217 new alumni. The Class of 2000 included 181 students with JD degrees, 20 with international LLM degrees, 15 with LLM degrees in taxation, and 1 with a JSD degree. This diverse class—made up of male and female, single and married, American and international students—has headed for an interesting range of careers. Four of those students reflect the diversity of the School of Law’s newest graduates.

WALTER HUTCHENS, JD/MA
Merging Chinese and Law

During his childhood in Alabama, where his father, now retired, was a Baptist minister, Walter Hutchens never knew anyone from Asia. Nor did he plan on a career in the law. At Samford University, a small private college in Birmingham, he majored in history and minored in journalism, with an eye to a career in writing.

But a couple of key decisions, along with a touch of fate, nudged him down a different, quite unexpected path. And in December 1999 Hutchens completed Washington University’s joint JD/MA program in law and East Asian studies. He has since joined the firm of Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison, which has one of the world’s leading China practices. After a training period in the firm’s New York City office, he will likely be posted to China, where he plans to focus on capital market and venture capital transactions.

The first, small step in this journey was an intriguing college course in Chinese history. That led to a second, even bigger, decision. While most of his friends were taking Spanish to fulfill the language requirement, Hutchens—remembering his history class—chose to take Chinese.

Then a brush with history sealed his interest in Asian studies. In 1989, as a college junior, he traveled to China with a group of faculty and students—arriving one week before troops crushed pro-democracy

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crushed pro-democracy protests in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. Although he and his group were staying at Anhui Teacher’s College in rural China, they witnessed protests by local students before they were whisked out of China on a jet chartered by worried parents.

“That trip was such a profound experience: intellectually engaging, exciting, frightening. So it really hooked me,” Hutchens recalls.

Although Hutchens took a job in Chicago as editor of the Magazine of Sigma Chi, his fraternity, after college, Asian studies remained a strong avocation. When books appeared about China, he found himself snapping them up. During meetings, he found himself doodling—in Chinese characters. He also met his future wife, Xiaoqiong Wang, a Shanghai Conservatory alumna who was a graduate student in music at the University of Illinois.

The couple moved to California, where Hutchens spent a turbulent year in corporate communications at Apple Computer. The company’s difficulties, combined with his own interest in becoming a lawyer with a focus on Asian affairs, tipped the scale. Hutchens and his wife decided to come to St. Louis for Washington University’s joint-degree program.

Today a “cheerleader” for the program, Hutchens is impressed by the Asian experts in the School of Law and in the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences. Demanding language classes and summer opportunities abroad combined to improve his Chinese. In fact, he is now collaborating on a textbook on legal Chinese with one of his professors.

Hutchens also had some unexpected successes while in law school. The United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit cited a piece he wrote in deciding a case concerning federal jurisdiction over lawsuits involving Hong Kong companies. And in his final semester, he presented a paper about Chinese securities regulation—originally written for a law seminar taught by Professor Frances Foster—to a conference of graduate students at Harvard University. “This paper represented a culmination of my time in the program. Without the language training of the joint-degree program, I could not have found and translated the regulations it was based on,” Hutchens says.

He continues, “Washington University allowed me to fulfill my dream of converting my interest in Chinese into a professional direction. Also, to the extent that law school can be enjoyable, it was a fun, challenging, and enjoyable place to spend three-and-a-half years.

“Now here I am, on the shore of the Hudson River looking over at Manhattan, and I have been fortunate enough to find a good job with an international firm,” he says. “I never imagined this.”

FRANCES MWWONGE, J.D
Fighting for the Disenfranchised

In 1975 Frances Naiga Muwonge was born to a life of privilege as a member of the Ugandan intellectual elite. Her father, who has a doctorate from the University of California at Los Angeles, was a university professor who taught political economy. Each child in her family had his or her own nanny. Then, in the blink of an eye, it was all gone.

Idi Amin had seized power in a 1971 coup d’état. During his dictatorship, intellectuals—particularly those, like Muwonge’s father, who spoke out—faced increasing danger. Muwonge’s family was placed under surveillance, and her father’s life threatened. In 1977 the family—among them her mother, then nearly nine months pregnant—fled to Kenya, leaving everything behind.

There they were joined by uncles, aunts, and cousins—14 people in all, packed into a two-bedroom graduate student apartment at the University of Kenya, where Muwonge’s father and uncle became visiting lecturers. They had little money and no electricity; food was scarce.

Subsequently the family traveled to Europe, the United States, back to Kenya, then again to the United States, where Muwonge’s father now works in development and emergency relief for a nongovernmental organization. This peripatetic life gave Muwonge—who speaks English, French, Luganda, and Wolof—a broad cultural perspective. But the family’s rapid change of fortune had a profound effect on her.

“That kind of experience changes someone,” she says. “You don’t take things for granted; at the same
time, you don’t value anything material that much. A highly paid job is no longer the be-all and end-all of your existence.”

Today Muwonge is an unabashed idealist who hopes to “save the world” by fighting for disenfranchised people—especially Africans—who have been overlooked for political reasons. As one of a few highly educated African women, she feels a special obligation to highlight the problems of these Africans to the rest of the world.

“When something happens in Kosovo or East Timor, the United States and Europe jump in to help, but the world tends to ignore problems in Africa, unless they are large in scale and horrifying,” Muwonge says. “My ultimate goal is for Africa to be seen as an integral part of the world and for me to help in its economic and educational development.”

Muwonge, who received her bachelor’s degree from Duke University and spent her junior year abroad at a university in Senegal, credits the School of Law’s faculty with broadening her horizons. Professor A. Peter Mutharika was an important mentor. She found the immigration law class taught by Stephen Legomsky, the Charles F. Nagel Professor of International and Comparative Law and director of the Institute for Global Legal Studies, to be challenging, and she says “he is one of the professors who drives you to do your best.” Professor Frances Foster, she says, “is unbelievable. She gives 110 percent and makes you want to give 200 percent.”

Work experiences during law school have also influenced Muwonge’s choices for the future. One summer she received a stipend for public-interest work in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs at the United Nations, where she saw firsthand how human rights abuses against women are handled on an international level. As a participant in the School’s Congressional and Administrative Law Clinic in Washington, D.C., she dealt with issues like racial profiling of immigrants as a clerk in the Office of Special Counsel for Immigration-Related Unfair Employment Practices at the United States Department of Justice.

She is now at a professional crossroads: facing the reality of educational debt, but yearning to make a humanitarian difference. A good compromise, she thinks, might be a job with a nongovernmental organization or with a law firm that deals in immigration law. Eventually she may head back to Africa.

“I’m not a big fan of armchair revolution,” Muwonge says, laughing. “I think you have to see what you are actually fighting for.”
The family has now moved to Chicago where Kim joined Marshall, O'Toole, Gerstein, Murray & Borun, a firm that specializes in intellectual property cases, particularly patents. There he focuses on patent prosecution: obtaining patent rights and assisting in patent litigation.

His own strong science background helped him land this job. Born in Korea, he came to the United States with his family when he was 5 years old; his father, a General Motors employee, worked first in Chicago and then in Alabama. Kim was a chemistry major and honors graduate of Georgia Institute of Technology before entering the doctoral program in biochemistry at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

But two years into the doctoral program, Kim began to reconsider a career in research. A visit to a convention, where he heard recent doctoral graduates grumbling about a lack of jobs, clinched his decision to leave with a master's degree. A friend suggested that the fast-growing field of patent law would use his scientific training in an exciting new way.

So on a family visit to St. Louis, he talked to members of the School of Law faculty, who encouraged him in his plans. He decided to take the plunge. "I half-jokingly told my classmates that I wanted to make sure I got out of school and was working before my son started school. I cut it pretty close, but I did it," he says.

At his new firm every member has a technical background. "In patents and patent applications, the substance of the invention is technical, so you have to understand the technology if you want to understand what the patent is describing. Biochemistry has enabled me to work on chemical patents and some biotech patents as well," Kim says.

His training at Washington University—especially an intellectual property curriculum that expanded into such new areas as patent drafting and patent litigation while Kim was a student—also helps.

"I have a very positive feeling about my experience at the School of Law," he says. "It is hard to say that anything is a 10 out of 10, but I could comfortably say it has been an 8 or a 9. It has been pretty much at the top of my expectations."

OKSANA SHOVKOPYAS,
International LLM
Taking Knowledge of
the United States and
International Law to the Ukraine

In August 1991 Oksana Shovkoplyas left her family in the Ukraine and traveled to Chicago to spend her last year of high school as an American Field Service exchange student. A week after her arrival, startling political changes took place back home: the collapse of the Soviet Union. All phone communication was cut off, and she had no idea what was happening to her parents and twin sister.

That anxious period ended after a month with the news that her family was fine. But the economic events triggered by this political upheaval have helped to shape Shovkoplyas' career. Today foreign investors—including large, multinational corporations—are trying to enter the Ukrainian market. Many young lawyers, like Shovkoplyas, are eager to work with these international clients. Understanding Western concepts of management is a help in meeting their needs.

So Shovkoplyas, who received a law degree from the Institute of International Relations of the National Taras Shevchenko University of Kyiv, was intrigued to hear about the Edmund Muskie Fellowship program, sponsored by the United States Department of State, which sends students from former Eastern-bloc countries to the United States for graduate degrees. In 1999 five recent Ukrainian law graduates were chosen for this program—Shovkoplyas among them.

She spent last year at the School of Law working on her international LLM degree, taking courses in
antitrust, securities, and corporate law. At times she found the transition to the American system of case law to be difficult since Ukrainian law is based on statutes enacted by Parliament or various executive bodies. This system, based on an assembly made up of many diverse political interests, means that the law is constantly changing and that new laws may contradict old ones.

“My country is divided among these different forces, and there is still some sentiment for the old times,” says Shovkoplyas. “It is important for young people to come home whenever they study abroad to implement everything they have learned.”

And the situation is gradually changing, she says. The president, Leonid Kuchma, has appointed a progressive government committed to market reform—a move well received by Western financial institutions. Parliament has also formed a “constructive majority,” which is trying to clear up some of the statutory contradictions.

Since her graduation in May 2000, Shovkoplyas has remained in the United States to pursue an internship with the United States Court of Federal Claims in Washington, D.C. Then later this year she plans to return home, where she plans to complete an MBA in international management and look for work as in-house counsel in a major corporation.

She has already had one professional experience in the Ukraine that solidified her interest in corporate law: a year spent working with the marketing team of the newly arrived Coca-Cola Company. Before her work at Coca-Cola, Shovkoplyas had worked for the International Foundation for Election Systems, a nongovernmental organization funded by the United States Agency for International Development that advised Ukraine’s parliament on passing legislation to ensure free and fair elections. In this job, Shovkoplyas got a good look at national politics. “It made me less likely to want to get involved in this,” she says.

In becoming a lawyer, she is emulating her father, a criminal and corporate lawyer who died several years ago. Her mother is a university professor of psychology; her sister, who received a degree in English language and literature, is studying for her MBA.

Shovkoplyas has very much enjoyed her experience at the School of Law, with its extraordinary building and its library and computing facilities.

She is also grateful for the attention that she and other international students receive from faculty and students: “Here the professors are much more open and helpful; we do not have this back home. I am very surprised and I admire this, and I thank the faculty for helping all of us.”