Answering the call to public service
First-year law students life after law school

Textbooks jumped to life last spring when 116 first-year law students took a break from their regular class schedule and observed — from start to finish — an actual criminal trial, believed to be one of the first programs of its kind on a law school campus.

And much like a premier of a movie, project coordinators held their breath waiting for the reviews to come in when the practicum ended.

“The highlight of my first year.”
“A superb learning experience!”
“A lifelong experience I will never forget.”

Such were the comments on evaluations turned in by students who sat through the week-long event, conceived by Professor Russ Lovell, the Law School’s executive director of clinical programs. Lovell was deeply involved in the practicum’s implementation and production, but he says the greater challenge was screening literally scores of cases to determine which would have educational value, would fit the time schedule and would not likely settle before the trial started.

“The practicum provides students with an experiential learning opportunity early in their law school career,” he says. “It manifests the Law School’s commitment to integrate theory and practice and substantiates our ‘lawyering from day one’ theme.”

Blumberg guilty of burglarizing an apartment building near downtown Des Moines. At the trial’s conclusion, Polk County District Court Chief Judge Arthur Gamble thanked the students for their cooperation and the respect they displayed throughout the trial. “Trying the case here has been a wonderful experience for us. It was just like trying a case downtown, except that the facilities are so much nicer,” he quipped.

Lovell says the logistics of moving a trial from a courthouse to a law school without compromising any part of the proceedings required the cooperation of a host of people including Gamble and other courthouse staff members; George Karnas, LW’81, the prosecuting attorney; and Tom Jackowski, LW’91, defense counsel.

But the practicum was not over when the verdict came in. In the final session of the project, students were given a rare opportunity to find out what makes jurors tick. With the judge’s approval, all but one returned the next day to discuss the trial with students. They talked about how the evidence was presented; about the attorneys’ mannerisms; about the defendant’s lack of eye contact with them; and about the magnitude of having to decide another’s fate, especially after the emotional testimony of the building’s owner, 91-year-old Helen Wyse.

Students found the jury debriefing extremely helpful in enhancing their understanding of the jury system. “Debriefing the jury gave me the ability to see that these people are smarter than we thought,” wrote one first-year student. “They had a lot of the same questions that many of us had...it reversed my feelings on juries and reinstilled the original intent of an impartial jury of my peers.”

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— Professor Russ Lovell, executive director of clinical programs
get sneak preview of

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Tom Jackowski, LW’91, represented Stephen Blumberg during the two-day trial that took place in the courtroom of the Neal and Bea Smith Law Center. The trial practicum included small group discussions, practice panels and a jury debriefing.

— Excerpt from student evaluation about the law in segments — procedure, evidence, constitutional law and so on. When they become lawyers, all those segments have to be reintegrated into the whole when they take on a case."

Now in his second year of law school, Patrick McGraw, from Oskaloosa, Iowa, agrees with Lovell and says the practicum "reinforced extremely powerfully" his desire to become an attorney. "A total immersion in the complete process after eight months of breaking up the law into tiny analytical pieces reminded us all of why we want to be lawyers and the magnitude, importance and enjoyment that accompanies that calling,” he says.

John Mooy, a non-lawyer faculty member of the National Institute for Trial Advocacy, was present throughout the practicum. His reputation as a mesmerizing storyteller has led to a unique connection with the legal profession. Last year, Mooy played an important role as a consultant to the U.S. Department of Justice on the opening and closing arguments in the Oklahoma City bombing trial of Terry Nichols.

Mooy equates a trial to a story and the lawyer to a storyteller. He reminded students that every client has a tale and how they tell it is an important part in winning or losing a case.

"In the middle of all our legal training mumbo-jumbo, it is refreshing to step back and realize that a jury needs to be told a story," wrote one student on the evaluation. "And in order to make everything else we’re learning useful, the ability to put that information into an effective story to which jurors can relate, is critical."