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Photos courtesy of Chicago-Kent College of Law

Teaching real-life legal skills

By Scott Baltic and Josh Wolff

Seth Darmstadter's mock trial experience at Chicago-Kent College of Law prepared him to be a litigator — in a way that his classroom experience couldn't.

It forced him to think on his feet while maintaining his legal acumen, skills essential to his legal career.

"The trial advocacy program has definitely given me an advantage in the private sector as a litigator," said Darmstadter, an associate at Meckler Bulger Tilson Marick & Pearson. "I have been able — out of law school — to jump right into cases and be able to handle myself in a way that is both credible and successful."

Because of this experience, it only seems

fitting that he devotes his time today to the program. As a 2004 graduate and former member of Chicago-Kent's mock trial team, he is one of many alumni coaches for the current trial team.

During the competition season, Darmstadter volunteers four to five evenings a week, usually from 6 to 9 p.m.

"It's a very substantial commitment for six to eight weeks," Darmstadter said. "People did it for us. ... The only way to pay that back is to donate your time to someone else."

After graduating from Chicago-Kent, Darmstadter jumped quickly into his first jury trial.

"I was relied on for hands-on trial work

right away because I could handle it," he said.

"There's a work ethic and a professionalism taught in this program that you don't lose," he said. "It's a great program, a great network. There's not enough that I can say about this program. ... It continues to help me to this day."

Because of dedicated students like Darmstadter, Chicago-Kent's list of accomplishments in the moot court arena are abundant.

First place: 2008 and 2009 National Moot Court Competitions. It's the first school in more than 30 years to win two years in a row.

First place: 2009 Evan A. Evans Constitutional Law Moot Court Competition.

Second place: 2009 Herbert Wechsler National Criminal Law Moot Court Competition.

Second place: 2009 John J. Gibbons Criminal Procedure Moot Court Competition.

First and second places: 2008 Appellate Lawyers Association Midwest Moot Court Competition.

First place: 2008 National Health Law Moot Court Competition.

First place: 2008 National Ethics Trial Competition.

And first place: 2007 and 2008 National Trial Competitions.

In 2008, Chicago-Kent also became the first school to win both the National Trial Competition and the National Moot Court Competition in the same year.

Chicago-Kent Dean Harold J. Krent said the school's emphasis on its trial and appellate advocacy programs and competition teams isn't about amassing awards. He said it rests on the school's educational philosophy.

"We want to prepare our students to enter the profession," said Krent, who has been a faculty member at Chicago-Kent since 1994. "Students emerging from our trial advocacy

program have a much easier transition to the world of litigation and the courtroom than others without the experience.

"We focus on a wide array of programs that make students not only think like lawyers but became adept professionals."

Although the trial advocacy and appellate advocacy programs have different focuses, they both draw from the best and brightest.

All students take a course in appellate advocacy during their second semester, Krent said, but anything beyond that is elective.

Students can apply to continue in one of several tracks in appellate advocacy, including the honors appellate advocacy track, a third-semester class. Students from this class make up the appellate advocacy team. Appellate advocacy also is tied into other programs, such as intellectual property.

Toward the end of their first year, all Chicago-Kent students participate in the Hughes Moot Court Competition, the school's internal appellate advocacy competition, where they prepare and deliver an oral argument on an appellate issue.

Associate Professor Kent Streseman has directed Chicago-Kent's Ilana Diamond Rovner Program in Appellate Advocacy for six years.

The appellate advocacy program has about 50 students, he said. Students compete against each other during the first semester of their second year, and then participate in outside appellate advocacy competitions starting in the second semester of that year. A student's third year usually is split between more competitions in the first semester and coaching in the second.

On the trial advocacy side, there's an open competition within the school twice a year to get into the trial advocacy program, said David Erickson, senior instructor and director of both the trial advocacy program and criminal litigation program. In that competition, students give an opening statement, conduct a direct examination and cross-examination, and deliver a closing argument in front of coaches and adjunct professors. The best competitors gain entry into the trial advocacy program.

There are also semester-long trial advocacy courses, and two intensive eight-day courses in the winter and summer. The best advocates in those courses are invited into the trial advocacy program.

There's a maximum of 16 members on the trial advocacy team: four who go to the National Trial Competition team, eight who

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Tuition: For the 2009-2010 academic year, \$37,800 per year (full time); \$27,750 (part time).

When to apply: Oct. 31 — Binding Early Decision Program application deadline. March 1 — Suggested application deadline for regular admission. Jan. 1 — Suggested application deadline for FAFSA.

LSAT: The median LSAT score for the 2008 fall class (full time) was 162. The 25th to 75th percentile range was between 158 and 163. For part-time students, the median was 157; and the 25th to 75th percentile range was between 155 and 159.

Undergraduate GPA: The median GPA for the 2008 fall class (full time) was 3.61. The 25th to 75th percentile range was between 3.30 and 3.79. For part-time students, the median was 3.37; and the 25th to 75th percentile range was between 3.13 and 3.54.

Law school size: 958 students for the 2008-2009 school year.

Student body statistics: As of 2008, the student body was composed of 48 percent women and 18 percent minorities. Students came from 39 states and 13 countries.

Employment statistics: For the 2008 graduating class, 90 percent of those who sought employment were employed within nine months of graduation.

Residence life: Students live throughout the city and suburbs, with many students living in Chicago's West Loop, Lincoln Park, Lakeview, River North, and Streeterville neighborhoods. The law school is also near two Metra train stations, which can make living in the suburbs convenient.

Source: All information provided by the law school.



compete in two teams of four at the American Association for Justice competition, and four younger students who assist and provide continuity into the following year.

Once a student has made it into one of the two advocacy programs, the fun really starts.

In the trial advocacy program, students practice from 4 to 7:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday, and four hours on Saturday and Sunday.

The students commit about 30 hours a week to the trial advocacy program, but the workload usually increases to 50 to 60 hours a week during the final weeks before a competition.

The appellate advocacy program is nearly as intense. The teams usually practice three to four times a week for two hours at a time, plus other prep work, totaling at least 15 to 20 hours a week around competition time.

“The students indoctrinate each other in how hard they’re expected to work,” Streseman said.

Each year, the appellate advocacy program sends out about 20 competition teams, eight in the fall and 10 to 12 in the spring. Because there are so many different appellate advocacy competitions, budget considerations and student skills and interest, among other factors, determine which competitions the program will enter.

“The attrition rate is very low,” Streseman said, and despite the workload, some team members also hold part-time jobs or work on the law review.

Despite the rigors of their classroom commitments, and the other stresses of their lives, the students remain enthusiastic.

“I show up at the practice, and they’re ready to go every time,” Streseman said. “They continually amaze me.”

Erin Duncomb just finished her second year at Chicago-Kent and is the current president of the Moot Court Honor Society.

The internal appellate advocacy competition, Duncomb said, “was the first time that law really clicked for me.”

She specifically likes both the intellectual challenge of appellate advocacy and how it has taught her to deal with high-pressure situations, even intimidating circumstances, forcing her to become “comfortable in the uncomfortable situations.”

Duncomb also said the extra responsibilities from the moot court program haven’t hurt her in other aspects of law school.

“You’re motivated to do well for your teammates,” she said, and part of the secret is that “it doesn’t feel like work.”

Erickson, a former trial and appellate judge, said the trial team alumni hold an annual dinner in June, with the latest one attended by 70 alumni.

Rachel Moran, who graduated last year, is a veteran of both the appellate and trial advocacy programs and was on Chicago-Kent’s winning team at the 2008 National Moot Court Competition.

“Trial ad is phenomenal prep for doing trial

work,” she said, and learning to deal with the workload was very much part of that preparation.

While in the middle of defending her fourth murder trial, Moran said the work in the trial advocacy program prepared her well for the amount of effort a real case demands.

Krent insists both programs could not provide its students with these learning experiences without dedicated staff.

“The leadership sets a tone,” he said. “When you have leaders such as David Erickson ... their professionalism and commitment set a standard that students can understand and emulate.”

“Alumni are very appreciative of their experience,” Krent said. “Many volunteer to coach teams and still stay in touch. They feel [the trial advocacy program] has been an important part of their lives and has opened doors for them in their profession.”

Darmstadter, of Meckler Bulger, said the trial advocacy program has shaped him not only as a professional, but also as a person.

“If you are a person who is willing to fully commit and put a lot time and energy into this program, the program will give back to you in an immeasurable way,” he said. “The relationships you build and skills obtained through the program are exceptionally valuable, not just immediately when you graduate, but as you continue in your career.” ■

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