Doing it right from the start

NIU law students take it upon themselves to create a professionalism group to infuse ethics into classmates

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These are bedrock principles of professionalism. And they are lessons that four students at Northern Illinois University College of Law hope to impart upon their younger colleagues and their peers.

“We thought it was important for the 1Ls, being new to the school and new to the profession, to have that presence (of a student-led professionalism organization),” said second-year student Joe Hagedorn, one of four founders of the Professionalism and Ethics Society.

“But we also thought that since the 2 and 3Ls would be going out into firms and moving into the real world that it would be important for them to have the ability to refresh themselves on the principles that we learned in the IL professionalism series.”

The series, Introduction to the Legal Profession: History, Culture and Values, is a six-part speaker program at NIU in which notables from the legal field talk with first-year students about professionalism and ethics.

Sponsored by NIU Law alumni and trustee Cherilyn G. Murer and her husband, attorney Michael A. Murer, the series has included sessions by Timothy McVeigh defense attorney Randall T. Coyne, Guantanamo Bay detainee attorney Jeffrey D. Colman of Jenner & Block LLP and Illinois Supreme Court Justice Thomas L. Kilbride.

For the four founders of the student group, the most memorable presentations were from the attorneys in the case involving Andrew Wilson and Alton Logan, in which attorney-client privilege prevented Wilson’s attorneys from alerting authorities that their client had confessed to a murder for which Logan was convicted.

Bound by the ethics of their profession, Wilson’s public defenders drafted an affidavit regarding their client’s guilt and Logan’s innocence.

Wilson died in 2007. In April 2009, with the help of Wilson’s attorneys and the quarter-century-old affidavit, Logan was exonerated.

“You can have a personal life and go on vacation. You can be a human being and still be an attorney.”

It is a powerful story and perhaps an attorney’s ultimate ethical dilemma.

“At the same time,” said third-year student Helen Mellas, “a majority of law students aren’t going to have that dramatic and big of a problem on their hands. It’s going to be on a much smaller scale.”

So Mellas, Hagedorn and fellow students Patricia Donahue and Dana Harold set out to create a student organization that would emphasize, Mellas said, “the practicality that most of us are going to experience.”

The organization is a result not just of the IL professionalism series but of a brainstorming meeting that professor Laurel A. Rigertas — who runs the series — held with upper-level students.

“I thought it was an important dialogue for the students to have to help me make the program the most valuable experience I could for them,” Rigertas said.

Areas that interested the students were greater exposure to the history of the legal profession, an introduction to the values of the legal profession and an introduction to the ABA model rules of professional conduct.

Also important to the students was that they take a leadership role on campus in the promotion of professionalism and ethics.

“I was very proud of them for taking ownership of the idea and wanting to make professionalism part of the culture of the college of law,” Rigertas said. “That was all their idea and their creation. It’s the kind of leadership and initiative that we like to see.”

The group leaders, Mellas said, have two major goals. They would like to create a mentoring program “so we can promote networking and professionalism to show law students that a work-life balance is possible.”

That’s because professionalism is about how a lawyer handles his or her personal life so that the professional life can flourish.

“My career is a service,” Donahue said. “I want to make sure that I am providing the best service I can for the people I’ll work for and the people that need assistance. I won’t be able to do that if I can’t manage my own life and responsibilities.”

The second goal is to start a scholarship to promote professionalism, ethics “and the importance of being a well-rounded student and attorney,” Mellas said.

They are goals that “thrilled” Dean Jennifer L. Rosato Perea.

“(The group) is a culmination on a lot of effort to integrate professionalism in the curriculum,” said Rosato Perea, who teaches the Professional Responsibility course and conducts an orientation session on professionalism in law school.

“It’s more than I could have imagined in a few short years.”

Ultimately, Rosato Perea said, professionalism and ethics must be “infused” into “a lawyer’s DNA.”

“You can’t lecture somebody about that,” she said. “They have to appreciate it and internalize it. And the society is a reflection that they are internalizing it and modeling it for other law students. That’s exactly where you want to be. That’s how you change the profession.”

Mellas hopes so too.

“We just want to show and offer the student body an honest and realistic expectation of what the legal profession is going to be like,” she said.

“You can have healthy relationships and a healthy life even if you’re an attorney. You can have a personal life and go on vacation. You can be a human being and still be an attorney.”