

# Legal liaisons

## Seasoned lawyers take fledgling colleagues under wing in pilot program

BY STEPHEN P. SCHMIDT

**D**ean Brad Saxton was one of the lucky ones. Within a year of graduating from law school in 1985, he joined the giant Washington, D.C.-based firm of Hogan & Hartson where several of the firm's senior members took him under their wing.

"During that time my partner-mentor friends were extraordinarily important in terms of me developing as a young lawyer, gaining confidence and not making mistakes," Saxton said.

It was largely that experience and the impact it had on his career that made Saxton so willing to get involved with a year-long pilot lawyer mentor program that began in January under the sponsorship of the New Haven County Bar Association.

After hearing a pitch for the program by Hartford attorney Lou Pepe and others on behalf of the Connecticut Bar Association early last year, Saxton agreed to head a New Haven County Bar Association committee to see the mentoring program to its fruition.

"The theory was that new lawyers coming out of law school have not had a chance to experience or to learn some things that are important to them as they manage the demands of being a new lawyer," Saxton said.

Established lawyers were paired, based on concentration areas and other factors, with new lawyers who recently passed the Connecticut bar and work or plan to work in the greater New Haven area. Throughout the year, the pairs will meet and discuss

the ins and outs that come with joining the local legal community while reinforcing a sense of professionalism and collegiality with fellow lawyers.

"One thing we really like about this program is that the mentor and the mentee are supposed to sit down together and map out their plan for the year, deciding which elements of the plan will make the most sense for that mentee with that mentor," Saxton added. He said new lawyers often get into trouble with clients for lack of experience in managing the client relationship. He cited a few examples.

"Things like failing to keep the client appropriately informed about pending matters; failing to return client phone calls or other inquiries in a timely manner; failing to make clear and documented arrange-

ments with the client at the onset of a representation about what the scope of the representation will be; failing to be sufficiently careful in managing client funds perhaps by wrongfully co-mingling them with other accounts or 'borrowing' from them to meet short-term financial needs, even with full intention of repaying the borrowed amounts," Saxton said.

Pepe heard about a mentoring program in a presentation given by the State Bar of Georgia at the American Bar Association's national convention in 2004. During his tenure as CBA president, he appointed a task force to look into implementing a similar structure in his own state in 2005. He envisioned a program that "would provide someone to whom the new mentee can turn to learn the customs and the usages and the unwritten rules of practice here in Connecticut."

The Connecticut Bar Foundation provided \$5,000 in seed money that will help support administration of the program and was instrumental in helping the NHCBA decide to run the pilot program this year in the greater New Haven area.

"I cannot be laudatory enough about his



Kevin Casini '09 is looking forward to the mentor experience.

efforts," Pepe said of Saxton. "If it were not for his efforts, we would not have even this pilot program."

Like Saxton, Pepe was mentored inside the comfort of a large law firm. This program, though, is designed to provide similar resources to all recent law school graduates, including those at smaller firms such as Kevin Casini '09. In November, he joined the small New Haven firm of Votre & Associates.

Casini, who served as the president of Quinnipiac's Student Bar Association during his final year in school, said he was intrigued by the program and signed on. He is one of 13 QU alumni to do so. "I think it's going to give me a way to provide to my employer better work and better service without having to constantly go to [my boss] with what he might think are simpler questions. It gives me an opportunity to ask those questions that some people might think are simple without having to worry about how it's going to be reflected in the workplace," Casini said.

Casini looks forward to the guidance, expecting it will reinforce what he thinks is correct or help him figure out how to correct what he's been doing wrong. Someday, he hopes to be a mentor.

When Pepe and Saxton asked area lawyers to get involved, they mentioned how the number of grievances filed against new lawyers in other states with similar programs had dwindled considerably following their establishment.

"I hope the program can grow to the success that it has enjoyed in some other states," said Jane Grossman '98, who agreed to serve as a mentor. "I also hope it has the desired effect of making the transition from law school to practice more smooth for newer bar members.... Law schools are very, very good for teaching students to be strong advocates, but there is not a mechanism in law school for teaching law students to be good, responsible members of the bar; those are the kind of things I think you would learn from a mentor," she said.

Grossman has worked as a staff attorney at the New Haven Legal Assistance Association for nine years and as a part-time faculty member at Quinnipiac for four years.

If the program is successful, a symposium would be held in 2011 to determine whether it would be possible to implement it on a statewide level.



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