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WESTERN NEW ENGLAND LAW REVIEW TRIBUTE TO DEAN BETH COHEN

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Cover Page Footnote

Patricia Newcombe, WESTERN NEW ENGLAND LAW REVIEW TRIBUTE TO DEAN BETH COHEN, 46 W. New Eng. L. Rev. 1 (2024)

WESTERN NEW ENGLAND LAW REVIEW TRIBUTE TO DEAN BETH COHEN*

PATRICIA NEWCOMBE**

It is a true privilege to offer this tribute to my friend, mentor, and colleague Professor Beth Cohen¹ for her service as Interim Dean during the 2022-2023 academic year, her commitment to legal writing and excellence in legal education, and her years of service to the Western New England University School of Law. This honor extended by the Editorial Board of the Law Review speaks volumes about the high regard students have for Professor Cohen, and her dedication and commitment to the School of Law.

I have known Professor Cohen since 1995, when I came to the School of Law as the Collection Services Librarian, and I have had the wonderful opportunity to work closely with her as a colleague. Reflecting on writing this tribute has made me very nostalgic, as I remember that Professor Cohen taught the first law school class I attended as a part-time evening student in 1997. Her class, Legal Research and Writing, was my favorite class in law school.

Professor Cohen's class was a place where we could combine the skills of research with analysis and writing and develop a strong work product, like a great memo. We were learning a process, a craft, and getting better at it with each writing assignment. Professor Cohen would read our work so closely and provide such thoughtful feedback that it pushed me to produce my best work. And, it was fun! It was a class where you could enjoy being a bit of a detective—digging, researching, reading, thinking, until it all made sense and you could determine how to apply the law to our assignment's fact pattern.

* The Editorial Board of the Law Review unanimously decided to dedicate Volume 46 to Dean Cohen for her service as Interim Dean during the 2022-2023 academic year, her commitment to legal writing and excellence in legal education, and years of service to the School of Law.

** Pat Newcombe, Professor of Law Library Research, Western New England University School of Law; former Associate Dean for Library & Information Resources (2011-2021); Associate Director (2004-2011); Head of Reference Services (2002-2003); Reference Librarian (1996-2002); and Collection Services Librarian (1995-1996).

1. Beth D. Cohen, former Interim Dean of the Western New England University School of Law; former WNE Associate Dean for Academic Affairs; Professor, Director of Legal Research & Writing; and former Director of the Academic Support Program.

TEACHING AND SUPPORTING STUDENT WELL-BEING

Professor Cohen is a master teacher, loved by many students since she arrived at the School of Law in 1990. She shows great concern for students and forges strong connections with them. She has a way of encouraging 1L students to participate freely in class. In their hectic world, Professor Cohen is the calm within the storm. She is not rushed or impatient with students, but understands the stresses they are under and responds with kindness. For many years Professor Cohen also provided support and guidance to upper-level students in the Externship Seminar, mentoring students working in legal placements, while she served as a liaison between the supervisors and the law school. Her seminar promoted student reflection and created a place where students learned from each other about the practice of law.

She cares deeply about students overall, not simply in how they approach the study of law, but in their overall experience at the School of Law. She wants students to be in a supportive environment in which to learn. She recognizes students' many-faceted lives require a balancing act. I always smile when I see her bringing in freshly picked apples for her Lawyering Skills students in the fall, or when she provides students with a list of fun local activities they may not be aware of, encouraging them to participate in some needed non-academic activities.

Professor Cohen founded and co-taught² the Mindfulness in Law Practice course at the law school nearly ten years ago, when it was a rather novel addition to curriculum, to introduce students to the benefits of incorporating mindfulness into the study and practice of law. Mindfulness fosters many skills and mental qualities that can support attorney well-being, and is encouraged by leading legal professional organizations.³ In acknowledgment of the importance of student well-being, Professor Cohen was the driving force in the Library's creation of a multiuse space designed with the whole student in mind. The space is used for quiet reflection, prayer, meditation, destressing, and yoga, and includes a private lactation room.

During her year as Interim Dean, she initiated the first workshop on mindfulness that was inclusive of both faculty and staff. She also encouraged faculty and administrators to take the Mental Health First Aid training that is offered to members of the University community to teach people how to understand, identify, and respond to signs of mental illness

2. Professor Myra Orlen and Professor Pat Newcombe have each co-taught this course with Professor Cohen.

3. MINDFULNESS IN LAW SOCIETY, <https://www.mindfulnessinlawsociety.org/> [<https://perma.cc/2HQJ-JSPE>].

and substance use disorder in others. Two law school administrators were among the first group of University members to be trained.⁴

Having people at the School of Law who can reach out and provide help and support to someone going through a mental health or substance abuse problem is compelling to Professor Cohen. She has increased collaboration with Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers (LCL) over the years, including them in new student orientation, providing office space in the building to allow for counseling, and participating in support programs. It is no surprise that she has recently been asked to join the Board of Directors for Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers—a lawyer assistance program in Massachusetts that promotes well-being and resilience in the profession, providing free and confidential mental health resources and addiction recovery support.⁵

Professor Cohen serves as faculty liaison to the First-Generation Law Student Support Group, a support group exclusively for law students at Western New England University School of Law who are the first generation in their families to attend law school.⁶ As a first-generation college and law school student herself, she provides support and advice on navigating the law school experience in the discussion group. Whether it is discussing coping skills for stress, understanding imposter syndrome, or maximizing student performance with study skills, her concern for student overall wellness is apparent.

MAKING LAW ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

Professor Cohen is passionate about making law more accessible to all. She supports this in a variety of ways via pipeline and community outreach projects. In 2015, she cofounded and codirected the popular civic education Mini-Law School Program at WNE—a way to provide nonlawyers with an understanding of legal topics that impact their everyday lives. Bringing legal information to the masses resonates with her. As her partner in this adventure, I can only say that the rapport we developed with our registrants, and the gratitude received from such a diverse group of individuals, was so very rewarding. Professor Cohen, along with Associate Dean Nicole Belbin, brought this program back in 2023, after a COVID-related hiatus.

Professor Cohen reinstated our partnership with Mass Mutual in the Discovering Justice Mock Trial program—a nonprofit organization that provides civics programming for grades K-12. Middle schoolers from

4. Associate Dean Jordan Hall, Dean for Law Student Affairs, and Adam Goguen, Assistant Dean of Career Services.

5. LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS MASSACHUSETTS, <https://www.lclma.org/> [<https://perma.cc/YUS9-JECK>].

6. Professor Cohen co-leads this group with Dr. Tracey Meyers, Psy.D., from Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers.

John J. Duggan Academy meet weekly with a team of mentors from the School of Law and Mass Mutual to examine the judicial system, learn case analysis and development, and practice the skills needed to persuasively argue before a judge. Professor Cohen is the coordinator for the School of Law legal mentors.

During 2023, Professor Cohen reinstated the School of Law's participation in next year's Judicial Youth Corps program. This program gives Springfield high school students who are interested in the legal profession an opportunity to learn about the judicial system and the rule of law through educational sessions and paid internships in the courts.

LEADERSHIP

It is certainly a daunting challenge to take over the helm of a law school for one year—to step into the vacuum when the prior administrator has left the law school entirely, and there is not yet a future administrator waiting in the wings. Professor Cohen, however, successfully managed the law school through 2022-2023, using her unique leadership style, which has been apparent throughout her many years at WNE. She is often sought out as a voice of reason, someone who can discuss problematic issues and work on resolution. She has a way of uniting community and helping to coalesce divergent groups. This made her an outstanding selection for the Interim Dean position. In addition, she is humble and cares about the overall good of the school.

During her deanship, Professor Cohen's vast institutional knowledge was extraordinarily helpful when interacting with the University and other constituencies. While things were done a certain way in the past, it did not preclude Professor Cohen from viewing a problem in an entirely new way. Her openness to moving in new directions is refreshing.

Professor Cohen's leadership style is collaborative in nature. She has an ability to listen and truly hear from various constituencies, which opens up new possible paths. She consults with others before decision making, whenever possible, and does not like to make decisions in isolation. Instead, she brings an open mindedness to her decision-making, taking into consideration the views of others who share different and perhaps unique points of view.

Professor Cohen often inspires collaboration for new initiatives. Many of the projects she has spearheaded have been done in partnership with others.⁷ Her enthusiasm for a potential project is catching and invites

7. Just a few of her initiatives include: instituting an Alumni on the Bench display in the School of Law that captures the names of our many alumni who have gone on to serve as judges, a project completed with Paula Zimmer, former Dean of Career Services; beautifying the School of Law with an array of artwork, including many local photography scenes, a project completed with Pat Newcombe; establishing the mentoring program with Career Services; revamping the Advising Program with Pat Newcombe; increasing opportunities for student relaxation and

others to join in. Plus, as her frequent partner in crime, I can attest that she is simply fun to work with!

One aspect of Professor Cohen's leadership style that I particularly admire is that she models respect and civility, especially well noted during faculty meetings. Professor Cohen adopts a positive and solution-driven approach in resolving conflicts. Civility involves more than good manners and listening attentively; it includes tolerance and respect for other points of view, and spurns personal disparagement.

SCHOLARSHIP

Professor Cohen's scholarship is in the areas of legal education, legal writing, civic education, and name change law. While those contributions to the legal community are significant, what I find most notable is her availability, as a colleague, to graciously review scholarship drafts from numerous faculty members. Her keen editing skills, astute analysis, and support are very much appreciated by many individuals. She has aided the careers of many law faculty by offering herself as a mentor for scholars. I have had both the benefit of her mentorship along with the opportunity to work with her on several writing projects. Writing with her is always a great experience to which she brings passion.

SUMMING UP

We all owe Professor Cohen a debt of gratitude for her year as Interim Dean; her commitment to legal writing and excellence in legal education; and her many years of supporting the School of Law, whether it was in her role as the first female Associate Dean for Academic Affairs⁸ (2009-2020), Director of Legal Research and Writing (1999-), Professor (1990-), or Director of the Academic Support Program (1994-2008).

During her tenure as Interim Dean, she appointed the Search Committee for the new Dean, which resulted in the outstanding hiring of Dean Zelda Harris. She prepared for Dean Harris's arrival by ensuring that all was in order for the changing of the guard. We are all very grateful for this smooth transition.

Looking back on the start of my years as a law student, I realize how lucky I was to be sitting in her Legal Research & Writing class in 1997. I did not know that one day I would come to teach the same course (now known as Lawyering Skills), sharing the same excitement about legal research and writing that I discovered in her class. I learned a lot about teaching from her, among many other things, and was very fortunate to

camaraderie, including the addition of a ping pong table in the student lounge with Pat Newcombe.

⁸ Professor Cohen was the longest serving Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and the first to serve under three Deans—no easy feat and quite an achievement in itself!

have Professor Cohen as a role model for developing my own teaching style. She offered me the opportunity to teach at the School of Law, encouraged my scholarship and professional presentations, offered advice throughout the tenure process, and became a writing partner and a co-presenter. I am grateful to her for her support, counsel, and friendship.

I know her colleagues and students could all share stories about her exemplary kindness. She serves as an example for all of us in the academy to follow. Professor Cohen should indeed be honored for her service as Interim Dean, her commitment to legal writing and excellence in legal education, and her many years of service to the School of Law, but it is her personal nature, her humanity, that marks her.