Profile: Chris Guthrie, Dean, Vanderbilt University Law School

by: Tracy Kane

I recently sat down with Vanderbilt Law School's new Dean, Chris Guthrie, to talk about teaching the law, the relationship between law schools and the legal profession, the economy, and life at the top of the law school food chain.

NBJ: Vanderbilt has a history of great teaching deans (think John Wade, Kent Syverud and Edward Rubin, among others) and you clearly fit this mold (Guthrie received a masters in education from Harvard prior to returning to his alma mater, Stanford, to receive his J.D.). What excites you most about taking on this new leadership position (prior to his appointment as dean, Guthrie led the faculty as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs) and what are your goals for your tenure as Dean?

CG: I couldn't possibly be more excited to assume this position! Well, maybe if the economy were a little stronger, I could be a little more excited. Conceptually, I think I'm most excited by the prospect of embracing both the Vanderbilt Law School past and the future. By this, I mean that I am excited to do what I can as dean to reaffirm the unique cultural environment that has shaped this school for generations; at the same time, I am excited to work with key constituencies to continue to improve the Law School's faculty, student body, academic program, and stature within the legal academy and profession. For what it's worth, I don't think there's much tension between our past and our future. Indeed, I think that looking backward will help us look forward because I am convinced that our unique law school environment is what will continue to set us apart from the many other fine law schools out there.

NBJ: It appears from your educational background, career path and research interests (Guthrie is a leading expert in behavioral law and economics; dispute resolution; negotiation; mediation; judicial decision making; and legal education and scholarship) that you have always been interested in education. Is that the case, and if so, what fueled your passion for teaching, particularly teaching young (and some not so young) people how to become lawyers?

CG: My interest in legal education reflects, in no small measure, my belief in the importance of the legal profession. Lawyers run the government – the judiciary, most U.S. presidents, about half of U.S. senators, and about a third of the members of the House are lawyers. Lawyers are also private sector leaders; at any given time, about 10% of Fortune 500 CEOs are lawyers. Lawyers work tirelessly on behalf of those in need – serving as prosecutors, public defenders, legal aid attorneys, and so forth. And private sector lawyers perform an important public service. Litigators and other dispute resolution professionals make peace possible by resolving those rare disputes that parties

are unable to resolve on their own, and transactional lawyers make prosperity possible by facilitating those rare deals that parties are unable to put together on their own. Given the important roles that lawyers play – and these, of course, are only a few of them – I feel privileged to play the small part I am able play in legal education.

NBJ: How do you expect your experience as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs to influence your decision-making and agenda as Law School Dean?

CG: I have spent nearly half my academic career as an Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. I have held the job at two different schools under three different deans, including my immediate predecessors at Vanderbilt: Kent Syverud (for one year) and Ed Rubin (for three years). As a consequence, I begin the job with three key advantages that I hope will help me dean effectively: First, and most obviously, I have a lot of law school administrative experience, particularly on the academic side. Second, I have worked closely with several key constituencies at Vanderbilt; perhaps most importantly, I have worked closely with most of the senior staff at the school. Finally, I have learned a great deal from the very different deans with whom I have worked and feel indebted to them for what they have taught me. Because I have seen very different styles of deaning, I believe I am well-positioned to make good choices about the kind of dean I want to try to be.

NBJ: Over the last several years, there has been an increasing level of "noise" in the legal profession and world of legal education debating whether U.S. law schools are adequately preparing law students to become 21st century lawyers.[1] Vanderbilt Law School has actually made quite a few strides over the last decade incorporating more practical experience into students' education including increasing both the number and diversity of legal clinics (appellate litigation, civil practice, criminal practice, domestic violence, intellectual property and the arts, and an international practice lab) and increased drafting and negotiation practice in the classroom; the law school has also adapted its curriculum, including first year courses, to include more modern subjects (*e.g.*, Regulatory State and Life of the Law) as well as provide students with opportunities to explore specialties and multi-disciplinary programs (*e.g.*, Litigation and Dispute Resolution, International Legal Studies, Law & Business, Law & Economics, Law & Human Behavior, and Technology & Entertainment Law Programs). With all of these changes already underway, what are you most excited about for the upcoming 2009-2010 academic year at VULS?

CG: We have an outstanding faculty filled with brilliant scholars and gifted classroom teachers, but by almost any conceivable metric, our faculty is too small. Beginning this academic year, we will initiate a multi-year process in which we plan to dramatically expand the size of our faculty. The process of identifying, evaluating, and recruiting potential faculty members is exciting, and I expect us to devote substantial energy to this process this year. And, of course, if we are successful, we will all benefit from the energy, ideas, teaching, scholarship, and service that new faculty will bring to the Law School.

NBJ: The current economic environment has impacted the legal profession in a much more profound way than previous recessions leading many to suggest that law has become a "mature industry" and that we have reached the end of the era of "Big Law."[2] Despite the doomsday predictions, there is no doubt that the legal profession is changing, perhaps both in good and bad ways, so how is the Law School preparing its students for post-graduation realities?

CG: Vanderbilt graduates remain much sought after, but the turmoil in the marketplace, though hardly as severe as in some other sectors of the economy, is worrisome. There are several disconcerting developments, including law firm salary reductions, layoffs, deferrals, and reduced or eliminated summer associate programs. We are monitoring the situation closely and are committed to doing what we can to facilitate job and career placement for our students. This year, in fact, we instituted a new Vanderbilt Law School Public Service Initiative in which we agreed to provide modest financial support to seventeen graduates to do six-month internships in public interest settings across the country. We are excited to help our graduates secure these placements. We are also excited about what these graduates will do for their communities, including Nashville, while they serve in these placements.

NBJ: Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with us.

CG: I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you about the Law School and look forward to working with the Nashville Bar in the coming months and years. ■

Tracy Kane *is a licensed Tennessee attorney and law clerk for the Honorable Richard H. Dinkins on the Tennessee Court of Appeals. She is also a recent VULS graduate ('08) and makes no excuses for any apparent bias in favor of her alma mater.*

(Footnotes)

[1] William Sullivan, Anne Colby, Lloyd Bond & Lee Shulman, *Educating Lawyers: Preparation for the Profession of Law*, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1st ed. 2007); Harry T. Edwards, The Growing Disjunction Between Legal Education and the Legal Profession, 91 Mich. L. Rev. 34 (1992); Bill Henderosn, Law School 4.0: Are Law Schools Relevant to the Future of Law?, July 2, 2009, http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/legal_profession/2009/07/law-school-40-are-law-schools-relevant-to-the-future-of-law.html.

[2] See Stephn M. Bainbridge, Is Law a "Mature" Industry? (July 9, 2009), http://www.professorbainbridge.com/professorbainbridgecom/2009/07/is-law-a-mature-industry.html; Douglas McCollum, *The End of Big Law*, Wall St. J., July 30, 2009, *available at* http://online.wsj.com/article/SB20001424052970203946904574300610126062746.html.