



A New Dean for a New Era

Twin Cities native David Wippman returns to lead the Law School.

BY FRANK JOSSI

On initial impression, David Wippman seems to be a scholarly, affable man who would be as comfortable scouring the library for legal reviews as he would be lecturing a group of fellow professors. But typically, first impressions are incomplete, and such is the case with the University of Minnesota's new Law School dean. True, Wippman has been a well-regarded academician at Cornell University Law School for 16 years, but he has also worked on cases involving international law that had him traveling to dangerous places. For example, he recalls a 1990 flight into Monrovia on a Nigerian military helicopter because Liberia was in the midst of a civil war pitting the guerrilla warlord Charles Taylor against government forces.



“There were no commercial flights, no security, no operating hotels or restaurants, so we packed in our own food and water,” he says. “It was a fascinating experience. We were able to meet with the most-senior officials of the interim government and advise them on legal and political issues.”

And he relishes telling of representing Liberia in a case before a district court in New York City. The judge asked Wippman if his client was part of a faction that had lopped off both ears of Samuel Doe, once Liberia’s president. “I was able to respond, ‘Your honor, it was just one ear. And it wasn’t my client,’” Wippman says.

After an extensive career at D.C. law firms, and at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, the dean arrives at an important point in the Law School’s history. He replaces interim co-deans Fred L. Morrison and Guy-Uriel E. Charles and faces the task of making change happen: from implementing and further developing an innovative new curriculum to raising funds and boosting the school’s national reputation. He can’t wait to get started.

“The University of Minnesota has a terrific Law School, and in keeping with the University’s strategic plan, my goal is to raise the Law School to the next level, to make it one of the top few public law schools in the country,” he says. “I want to do it in a way that is consis-

tent with our mission as a public law school, which will give it a little different direction than some other law schools might have.”

An A-team choice

After an international exploration for candidates that started last May, the dean search committee reached a consensus quite readily once Wippman visited. Clearly, he had come prepared. He had researched the University and arrived armed with specific ideas for improving the Law School, attracting a diverse student body, raising money, and elevating the national ranking.

“He started out by saying he enjoyed the opportunity to come to a great law school and he wanted to make it an even greater law school,” recalls Judy Oakes (class of ’69), a selection committee member. “How can you not like that?”

Jon Binks, an assistant to Provost E. Thomas Sullivan who coordinated the search committee, says Wippman brings a “trifecta” of experience as a scholar, a practitioner, and a former public servant. Plus, Wippman has managerial experience gleaned from his three-year tenure as Cornell’s vice provost for international relations and an understanding of the importance of the University’s vision for itself and the Law School, Binks says.

Wippman has a keen sense of collegiality and an ability to listen while explaining his vision for the future, Binks says. “He’s unflappable, he’s a good listener, he has a wonderful sense of humor, and he has great people skills. I think the dean has a combination of strengths that are rarely found in one individual: He’s an exceptional scholar, he’s also had experience under the Clinton Administration, he’s done some important international rights works, and he was a managing partner of a Washington law firm.” Binks concludes, “I’m extremely positive about his selection, and that isn’t hyperbole.”

Binks’ boss is just as enthusiastic. “In this period of transformative change and high aspirations,” says University President Robert H. Bruininks, “the Law School needs an exceptional leader who cherishes the historic mission and critical contribution of a public law school in the 21st century. Dean Wippman will be that outstanding and inspiring leader.”

The training of a dean

Wippman spent his first decade in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, before his family moved to nearby Edina. His father, Harold, graduated from the Law School in 1949 but worked in the insurance industry. His mother, Gertrude, taught Latin and French in a local Catholic high school. His sister, Judy, is a clinical psychologist in Chicago.

Wippman attended the University of Minnesota for a year before applying to several Ivy League schools. Princeton accepted him and he went off to New Jersey to earn a bachelor of arts, summa cum laude, in English. He intended to pursue graduate school in English but decided to take a year off, in 1977. Half of the time he spent in the Twin Cities driving a taxi and the other half as “a ski bum” and cook in Vail, Colorado. The ski community was experiencing the worst drought in a generation, but he hit the not-very-snowy slopes as often as possible and also learned the art of making a good pancake.

With aspirations to become an English professor, Wippman traveled next to Yale, where he entered the English literature program on a fellowship. By year’s end, he joined 11 other students who dropped out of the program. “I would have loved to write the great American novel, but I knew early that wasn’t in the cards,” he says. “My plan was to get a degree and teach at the college level. Even though I thoroughly enjoyed what I was doing, I didn’t have the commitment that was required.”

Off to Washington

Just when Wippman was wondering what to do next, a friend planning to work in Washington at Arnold & Porter, one of the District’s larger and better-known law firms, suggested Wippman join him. The year-long job gave Wippman a glimpse of precisely what he was looking for: a profession where he could exercise his writing and analytical talents while pursuing his personal goal of a life in academia. It would take another decade to get there, but he was on the right track.

Accepted at Yale Law, he served as editor-in-chief of

the prestigious *Yale Law Journal*, a responsibility that taught him to “think through the logical structure of an argument and analyze what makes for effective writing,” he says. A clerkship followed in New York with Judge Wilfred Feinberg, chief judge for the U.S. Court of Appeals, Second Circuit.

Wippman returned to Washington to work briefly at the Washington, D.C., office of Powell, Goldstein, Frazer & Murphy, an office led by several Carter Administration alumni. A dullish corporate caseload had started him thinking about other employment when a serendipitous event sent him on the way to becoming an international litigator and transformed his life.

Two attorneys at the firm, Paul Reichler and Judy Appelbaum, had begun working for the Nicaraguan government in a case against the United States and its support of the Contras, a guerrilla group sponsored by the Reagan Administration. With the firm uncomfortable at the prospect of some of its top attorneys litigating against the U.S. government in the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Reichler and Appelbaum split off and started their own firm. They invited Wippman to join them, and the firm of Reichler, Appelbaum, and Wippman was born. It specialized in representing developing countries, and Nicaragua was its first client.

The firm won the jurisdictional phase of the case against the United States, which withdrew before the merits phase. It won again in The Hague, but as the damages phase wore on, Nicaragua’s president, Daniel Ortega,

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lost the 1990 presidential election, and the firm lost a client. Regarding the irony that Ortega is the country’s president again, the dean notes: “His politics have evolved.”

In Liberia, the firm defended the interim government against plaintiffs seeking default judgments in the United States and execution of those judgments on Liberian assets held in U.S. banks. The amount at stake was substantial. Shipping companies from around the world were registered with and paid dues to the Liberian Maritime Registry, and that money was held in the United States. Much legal wrangling ensued as the country fell into a brutal, chaotic civil war that left thousands dead and more than 200,000 displaced. But even failed states can litigate. “It was possible, even though the Liberian government had collapsed and there was no effective authority in control of the country as a whole, to have an almost ordinary litigation against Liberia go forward in the United States,” says Wippman.

Customary billable hours were not always possible in working with developing countries. The firm had an annual retainer with Nicaragua and special arrangements with other clients, including Guatemala and the Philippines. In one instance, Wippman recalls, a client from Nigeria “sent over a guy who brought money in a brown paper bag, in cash, and said we could get all the legal work we wanted if we were prepared to inflate our invoices by 30%.” When Wippman said no, “the person saw it as a chance for a counteroffer. We had no further work from that client.”

Back to academics

A decade of practicing law did not diminish Wippman’s desire for academia. When he heard about the Cornell opening, he applied and received a professorship. The dean at the time noted that Wippman had more experience in professional practice than any other law professor at the school. But he had teaching experience, too, having been an adjunct professor at American University’s law school.

At Cornell he taught courses in international law and human rights and seminars in ethnic conflicts. Without the pressures of a law practice, he could devote time to his favorite craft, legal writing, and assisted in the authorship of three books on international law and the rule of law in the wake of military interventions. He has also written or co-written dozens of law review articles and book reviews.

A highlight of his tenure at Cornell was a one-year appointment (1998–1999) as a director in the Office of Multilateral and Humanitarian Affairs at the National Security Council (NSC) in Washington. The NSC provides a channel of advice (outside the State Department) to the president and the executive staff. Wippman loved the chance to be a “policy person” and, in his year of service, to dig into the details of creating the United Nations’ International Criminal Court in Rome. One cherished memory is a visit to Kosovo with human rights advocate and author Elie Wiesel to witness the aftermath of the war between NATO and Serbian forces.

In a move that still upsets many human rights activists, the United States decided not to support the International Criminal Court, voting in Rome against its creation. Wippman says the U.S. delegation was “terrific,” but “there were some internal divisions in the policy apparatus in Washington. It made it hard for our delegation to be as effective as it could have been. If we had been more flexible early on, we might have had a different result.”

Agenda for the future

The dean expects exciting results as he and the Law School embark on a new era. He wants to continue to build on its many strengths, which include his own areas, international law and human rights, as well as criminal justice, intellectual property, science and technology, and legal history, among others. “We’re poised to make important contributions to policy debates that are ongoing and to support creative and real-world solutions to difficult social and economic problems,” he says. He also wants to con-

tinue the trend toward multidisciplinary scholarship and expand collaboration with other units of the University.

Wippman is enthusiastic about curriculum changes. “I’ve heard of other schools reforming their curricula, but few are this far along or as comprehensive in their approach as Minnesota,” he says. “Minnesota is positioned to be a leader in the revitalization of the law school curriculum.”

What are these changes? First-year students will be able to choose one of four electives (e.g., international law, corporate law), find professional responsibility topics built into a variety of courses, and benefit from greater emphasis on statutory interpretation, legal ethics, and “law as a form of problem solving,” says Wippman.

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A new course, “The Work of the Lawyer,” will continue training students to be problem solvers, and third-year “capstone” courses will feature a lead professor and faculty from other disciplines working with small groups of students for a full year on complex issues, such as global warming, healthcare, or other major social problems. The goal of the capstone program, still being created, is to give budding attorneys a chance to exercise talents other than legal analysis and to understand problems “in a larger context,” says Wippman. It will not only give students a much broader view of law, it will contribute valuable information through important debates over critical, current topics.

Wippman recognizes that the Law School faces three immediate priorities: faculty, funding, and facilities. He wants to begin building an endowment within the next five years for a possible addition to the existing Law School building, which is almost at capacity. The privately raised money would also help recruit nationally known faculty.

Ties that bind

“Minneapolis is my hometown. My mother lives here, I have other family here, so I am excited to return,” Wippman says. For now, his family will remain in Ithaca so his younger daughter, Lauren, can finish high school. His older daughter, Brianna, is a sophomore at Cornell. His wife, Meredith, an independent art consultant, will later join him in what they anticipate will be a new adventure in the region where he grew up. “As for the weather,” Wippman says, “it’s colder here than in Ithaca, but sunnier, so it balances out.”

By Frank Jossi, a freelance writer based in St. Paul.