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Faculty Spotlight: Sonja West

News @ Georgia Law August 2012 Faculty Profile

Name: Sonja R. West

Title: Associate Professor of Law

Courses Taught: Constitutional Law I and II, Media Law, The Supreme Court: Current Term, The Press and the Constitution

Hometown: Bettendorf, Iowa

Law school/graduation year: University of Chicago / 1998

Other degree(s)/institution(s)/year(s): B.A. / University of Iowa / 1993



1. What influenced your decision to go to law school?

▶ As early as third grade when I began a "newspaper" for neighborhood kids, I knew I wanted to be a reporter. My work as editor-in-chief of my high school paper led to a journalism scholarship at the University of Iowa and a chance to write for the student paper, *The Daily iowan*. One of the requirements for my journalism degree was to take a media law course, which I found fascinating. I ended up working as a research assistant for that professor who exposed me to the world of law. While working as a reporter after graduation, I was intrigued by how the law both helped and hindered our ability to cover the news. I ultimately decided I wanted to go to law school so I could be an advocate for journalists.

2. What did you do before entering the legal teaching academy?

▶ After clerking, I practiced media law in Los Angeles. I was lucky because I was able to work on issues I care about such as media access, defamation, freedom of information and reporter's privilege.

3. What made you decide to become a professor?

▶ I really missed school. I have always loved school and feel that I am truly at home in an academic environment.

4. What do you enjoy most about your job? What is the most rewarding aspect of being a professor?

▶ The best part of our job is the intellectual energy at the law school. We are all – students and faculty alike – constantly learning from each other. As professors, we enjoy the freedom of pursuing whichever legal issues most interest us. It's a luxury for which I am grateful every day.

5. What type of influence do you hope to have on your students?

▶ I try to teach my students about the human side of the law – that the law is something created by humans, interpreted by humans and used to govern humans. Perhaps it's the journalist in me, but I love to share the real stories behind the cases. My hope is that my students will understand that when they become lawyers, they will have an impact on how the law is made and its effects on others. As lawyers, we have a powerful role in society and it's a role that comes with important obligations.

6. Are you currently conducting any research? If so, what is its focus?

▶ My current research is on the history and meaning of the First Amendment's Press Clause and how it should be applied to our modern world.

7. What do you enjoy doing in your free time? What are your hobbies?

▶ I used to enjoy independent films, running and reading and writing fiction. Now my hobby is keeping up with my 4-year-old daughter and my 1-year-old son!

8. How do you stay up to date on legal issues and trends?

▶ By reading newspapers, of course! I've also found that nothing is more informative than getting together with scholars who share my interests and talking about our work. A great conference can be priceless.

9. What book/resource do you find yourself referencing the most?

▶ The Constitution. I also often tell stories from *The Brethren* by Bob Woodward and Scott Armstrong. There are some terrific behind-the-scenes anecdotes about cases we study in class. Students are frequently shocked to learn how the sausage is made.

10. What advice would you give to current law students?

- I find that every student needs different advice. Some need to take school more seriously while others could lighten up a little. Some require extra coaxing to speak up in class while others should practice their listening skills. My job is to try to get the right message to the right student. But they all should try to write as much as they can.



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