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August 2013 E-newsletter Faculty Spotlight: Thomas A. Eaton

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Faculty Spotlight: Tom Eaton

News @ Georgia Law August 2013 Faculty Profile



Name: Thomas A. Eaton
Title: J. Alton Hosch Professor of Law
Hometown: Manhasset, New York
Law school / graduation year: University of Texas / 1975
Other degree(s) / institution(s) / year(s): B.A. in government / University of Texas / 1972

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

It was always in the back of my mind. When I was an undergraduate student in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many in my generation saw law as an instrument for achieving positive social change. During my junior year of college, I took a couple of pre-law classes that employed the Socratic method. These classes convinced me that the study of law was intrinsically interesting independent of the end it might achieve.

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

My career path was very traditional. I clerked for a wonderful federal district court judge for two years and practiced law in Austin, Texas, for two years. I was only 4 years out of law school when I began teaching at UGA.

3. What made you decide to become a professor?

I absolutely loved the intellectual challenge of the first year of law school. I guess I am one of those people who like law school so much I decided to spend most of my life in it.

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

Teaching first-year students is pure joy for me. They are smart, motivated and willing to work. Helping first-year students develop the analytical skills they need to become competent attorneys is both fun and satisfying. The most rewarding aspect of the job is the relationships I make with my students, both while they are in school and after they graduate. Like many who teach, I get excited when I read about the accomplishments of those I have taught.

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

I hope that I convey my sincere belief that law is a noble profession that presents one with myriad opportunities to serve the community. On a more practical level, I try to illustrate through my teaching the importance of preparation and clarity of thought. Whether one engages in a transactional or litigation practice, there is no substitute for thorough preparation and clear thinking.

6. What made you decide to specialize in torts?

That's easy. Dean Ralph Beard offered me the choice of teaching contracts and commercial law courses or torts and tort-related courses. Torts is a lot more fun than contracts.

7. What do you enjoy most about this area of the law?

Tort law in a very literal sense separates "rights" from "wrongs." It is the mechanism through which society decides what "rights" individuals hold vis a vis each other and what conduct will be considered a "wrong." Torts also presents a strange ambiguity of image. On the one hand, the image of ambulance chasing lawyers is profoundly negative. On the other hand, American tort law offers a unique and meaningful opportunity for a person of limited resources to obtain redress against large and powerful institutions for wrongs they may have committed. For me, that latter image of the tort system has great appeal.

8. What is one of the greatest challenges facing this area of law today?

The combination of the increasing cost of litigation and the constraints imposed by so-called "tort reform" are making it more difficult for people with less than severe injuries to secure access to the system. If tort law fails to provide an avenue for redress except in cases of catastrophic injuries, it may give way to some form of no-fault system that provides more limited recoveries to more people.

9. What do you consider your greatest academic contribution?

I don't know that any of my academic contributions have been "great," but I am proud of the empirical work I have done on tort litigation and workers' compensation. I was most fortunate to have collaborated with Susette Talarico (political science) and David Mustard (economics) in these projects. These empirical studies shed much needed fact-based light on how the tort and workers' compensation systems actually work in practice. The systems in practice are quite different than the political rhetoric of "litigation explosion" and "runaway juries" would suggest.

10. What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishments in life?

In terms of my professional life, and again, I am not sure these are personal accomplishments, but I am proud to have played a role in starting the mock trial program, the Equal Justice Foundation and the Lumpkin Inn of Court.

11. What is your favorite thing about living in Athens?

It is a friendly, small town that offers a wide range of diversions—good restaurants, music, sports and interesting people. We raised our two children here and they have nothing but good memories of growing up in Athens.

12. If you could share an afternoon with anyone, with whom would you choose to spend it.

My mother. She died when I graduated from high school. We were very close. A lot has happened to me since then and we would have a lot of catching up to do.



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