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Nov. 2014 E-newsletter Faculty Spotlight: Dan T. Coenen

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Faculty Spotlight: Dan T. Coenen



Name: Dan T. Coenen

Title: University Professor & Harmon W. Caldwell Chair in Constitutional Law

Hometown: Appleton, Wis.

Law school/graduation year: Cornell University / 1978

Other degree(s)/institution(s)/year(s): B.S. / University of Wisconsin / 1975

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

I went to law school because I didn't have another plan. I was not interested in pursuing further studies in math or science. I had a general sense that lawyers help people who are in trouble. I had enjoyed social studies. I really didn't know much about law or lawyering. Essentially, I was pretty lucky to land in an area that turned out to be fascinating and fulfilling for me.

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

I had two judicial clerkships, and each of them was an amazing experience. Next, I traveled around the world. Then I worked for about six years at Robinson, Bradshaw and Hinson, an excellent private law firm in Charlotte, N.C. Again, I was lucky because my firm turned out to be a first-rate operation, a place filled with great people, and a good fit for me.

3. What made you decide to become a professor?

Law school. When I was a law student, I found meaning and delight in thinking hard about knotty legal problems and discussing the mysteries of the law with others. I also grew in my enjoyment of writing, including scholarly writing. Most important, I like people, and I sensed that I would enjoy working collaboratively with students. I am a great believer in Socratic teaching and learning, in part because I had several great Socratic teachers in law school. From an early point in my career, the idea of helping students grow into lawyers – particularly through exposure to Socratic teaching – was something that greatly appealed to me.

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

What I enjoy most about my job is my students and the most rewarding aspect of my work with students is watching them steadily become better and better in working with the law. I was reminded just today that one of my favorite times of the day is right after a class period ends, when bright and curious students approach me with questions and comments. I thoroughly enjoy classroom teaching, but there is something very special, too, about trading ideas with small groups of my wonderful students.

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

Hopefully, a positive one. Last year, I set out to make a list of the various skills that I hope to help build in my students. The process was eye-opening, because my list just kept getting longer and longer. I can't say that my list is finished even now, because I still think of items to add to it from time to time. Anyway, this list now includes more than 100 separate skills. More than 100! The amazing thing about law school is that the student is being called on to assimilate all of these skills at the same time. That is extremely challenging – just as being a good lawyer is extremely challenging – and my core objective, I suppose, is simply to help my students as they confront this challenge. In my own way, I also try to communicate the value of a positive attitude, a caring spirit, and good humor in navigating life. I hope that at least a little bit of all this rubs off in a useful way on my students.

6. You currently teach several courses. Which one is your favorite to teach and why?

I teach first-year Contracts and upper-level Constitutional Law. I can never figure out how to answer this question, so I just won't. For me, both of these subjects are totally amazing, even though they are very different. As every lawyer knows, contracts is a rich common-law subject built around a curious vocabulary and legal structures that typically are unfamiliar to the new law

student. There is a great opportunity for growth in grappling with such a subject, and it is wonderful for me to hear a student say: "I had no interest in contract law when I came to law school, but now I think it is really cool." Constitutional Law is in the news, and students often bring strong personal opinions to the subject. I find meaning in trying to get students to think about constitutional law as law, even while recognizing that the shape of that law is influenced by political events and changing attitudes over time. I also find fascinating our basic constitutional structures, how they are designed to respond to deep-rooted features of human nature, and the deep tension between maintaining stability and facilitating change within our constitutional system.

7. What advice would you give to current law students wanting to eventually practice in the field of law?

Be positive. Be flexible. Stick with it. Build bridges. Work hard. Learn. Learn. Learn. Think of your quest in terms of adding value. Ask yourself not what can this employer do for me but what can I do for this employer.

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

Wow! That is a hard question. I have been fortunate to be here in Athens for 27 years. I have met a ton of wonderful, fascinating, caring, diverse, spirited, friendly people. Maybe this would have happened anywhere, but I do have a sense that there is something very special about the energy of Athens. In any event, it has been a great place for my family and for me. I am very devoted to Athens and grateful to be a part of it.

9. What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

At the center of everything is my family. Doing fun stuff with my wife, Sally, and with our three children is always special for me. Last night, for example, I watched Monday Night Football with my daughter Amy – and that was just a great, great night for me. I am also blessed to have many good friends, and I enjoy just hanging out with them, especially when there is laughter in the air.

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

Maybe with all of my past students. It is hard to imagine how that afternoon would play out – and I know I would feel some trepidation because I wouldn't remember all the names and faces. But it would surely be an emotional time for me – and quite a party!