11-1-2012

November 2012 E-newsletter Faculty Spotlight: Elizabeth Weeks Leonard (J.D.'99)

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Recommended Citation


https://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/profiles/25
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1. What influenced your decision to go to law school?
   > After college, I worked in Chicago as a psychiatric social worker, helping adults with severe and chronic mental illnesses navigate the health care and public assistance systems. After experiencing the inadequacies and dysfunction on the ground level, I was torn between studying social work or law but decided that law school would give me greater skills as an advocate for change.

2. What did you do before entering the legal teaching academy?
   > I clerked for two judges, in New Orleans and Austin, and practiced in the health industry group of a multinational firm in Houston. Much of my practice was advising large health care providers on compliance, reimbursement, and business planning. I loved the technical, detailed, problem-solving nature of the work.

3. What made you decide to become a professor?
   > One of the things that I loved about law school was the opportunity – the luxury – to learn something new every single day. Getting to become a professor lets me indulge that luxury as my career. When I practiced law, I often would become very interested in an issue that I was researching but could afford to learn only enough to satisfy the client's need. I always wanted to know more! As an academic, I have the freedom to follow my curiosity wherever it leads.

4. What type of influence do you hope to have on your students?
   > I hope to share my enthusiasm for and fascination with the law. My goal in the classroom is to encourage students to think critically about the legal rules and principles they are learning, not simply to recite them.

5. What made you decide to specialize in health care law?
   > I went to law school with the goal of “fixing the system” – as a means to an end. I had no idea how much I would enjoy the intellectual exercise of studying law and the process of legal analysis, abstracted from that goal. My love of the law led me to private practice with a law firm that represented sophisticated health care entities because they presented a wide range of novel, challenging issues.

6. What do you enjoy most about this area of the law?
   > Health law is incredibly dynamic, policy-driven, and interdisciplinary. Among health law professors, we joke that since the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 (ACA) and the Supreme Court decision last summer, suddenly everyone in the legal academy purports to be an expert in health law. But we've been studying these issues for years!

7. What advice would you give to current law students wanting to practice in this field?
   > Take Administrative Law. The first-year curriculum emphasizes judicial decisions and the common law. For a health lawyer, case law is much less important than statutes, regulations, administrative adjudication, and sub-regulatory guidance. Being versed in these other sources of law and knowing how to find them is essential.

8. Are you currently conducting any research? If so, what is its focus?
   > For the past few years, my research has focused on the ACA, particularly the role of states in challenging and implementing it. I've just started working on a new project on health insurance pricing based on voluntarily behaviors that impact health. The ACA prohibits insurance companies from charging higher premiums to people who have known health conditions but allows premium rate variation based on tobacco use and participation in wellness programs. I'm thinking about how far we might extend that policy – if you break your arm ski-diving or keep getting sick because you don't manage your stress, should insurers be allowed to charge you more?
9. What is your favorite thing about living in Athens?

> I’m shamelessly biased because I am a native Athenian. Athens is the quintessential Southern college town. One of the things I love the most is springtime. When I decided to leave Chicago to come back to Athens for law school it was after seeing television coverage of the Master’s golf tournament – green grass, azaleas, magnolias – while there was just grey gutter slush of never-ending winter outside my window.

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

> As much as I love reading and thinking about the law, when I am not at work, I like to be active and outdoors as much as possible. I run or ride most every day. I’ve done six marathons, countless half-marathons, and dozens of “century” (100-mile) bike rides.

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

> It’s hard – especially with all of the changes in health law as the ACA is implemented over the next few years. I subscribe to a number of health law news listserves and read industry and popular media sources. One of the greatest pleasures of academia is sharing ideas with other scholars around the country. My health law colleagues are so well-informed and deeply thoughtful – they keep me on my toes!

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

> My husband. He is a fount of knowledge and experience, especially about the natural world. He sees things I would never notice on my own and thinks much more carefully than I do about how we impact the planet on which we live. He humors me by letting me do The New York Times crossword puzzle with him, but he doesn’t really need my help.