

Eric Easton Interview

Tue, 3/29/2022, 31:15

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Law school, Baltimore, journalism, China

SPEAKERS

Interviewer: Angela Koukoui

Interviewee: Eric Easton

Angela Koukoui

Welcome, Professor Easton, to our University of Baltimore Stories 100th Anniversary Oral History Project. I am very excited to speak with you about your tenure here at University of Baltimore. And talk a little bit about some personal information that you will share with us. The first thing I would like to know is where were you born?

Eric Easton

I was born in Washington, DC.

Angela Koukoui

Oh, right around the corner.

Eric Easton

A native Washingtonian.

Angela Koukoui

Great. And where did you grow up, in DC as well?

Eric Easton

Partly. My family traveled a bit while I was young, and I grew up in Indiana, in part, in California, in part, and then we came back to the DC/Maryland area.

Angela Koukoui

Great.

Eric Easton

Finished high school in Maryland.

Angela Koukoui

Okay. And what would you say your childhood or family life was like growing up?

Eric Easton

Oh, it was terrific. Because we did move around a bit and got to see a lot of the country. I have three terrific siblings. And we had a really, really good experience growing up. We had some hardships, [and] we had some good times. And in the end, it all worked out pretty well.

Angela Koukoui

Great. And are you still currently in Baltimore?

Eric Easton

I live in Silver Spring.

Angela Koukoui

Okay, and where did you begin your college education and what was your major?

Eric Easton

I got my bachelor's degree from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Some 20 or so plus years later, I went to law school at what we call the "other" law school in Baltimore. And then, some number of years after that I went to College Park to get my PhD in Journalism.

Angela Koukoui

Okay, what led you to study law?

Eric Easton

Well, I was a practicing journalist for a little over 20 years. And the job that I had was beginning to get a little dull. I wanted to go back to school. My first thought was to get a graduate degree in journalism. But these were the days of paper applications, and the application was about 65 pages. And I just didn't have time for that. The law school application was pretty simple. It basically said, "What's your LSAT score?" "And have you ever been convicted of a felony?" And, I thought that was a much easier application to fill out. And so, I did, and that's what led me to study law. I had no real intention of practicing law.

I didn't really know what I was going to do with it. I was essentially looking to escape the increasing sameness of my job. And so, I went to school at night. The only schools I applied to were UB and, and the "other law school" [University of Maryland School of Law] and I went to the "other law school" because the schedule was better for me. They had Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evening courses, UB had Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evening courses, so I liked the Monday, Wednesday, Friday schedule better. So that's where I went.

Angela Koukoui

Great, and what drew you to the University of Baltimore? And what did you teach here?

Eric Easton

Well, by the time I graduated from law school, I had an idea that I wanted to teach. My assumption all along is that I would teach journalism. And particularly, what's now called Media Law. Media Law is a required subject for all journalism students. And I thought maybe that was my best shot since I had both journalism and law degrees. And I started teaching as an adjunct at Loyola. Then it was called Loyola College. And I also applied to teach legal writing, as an adjunct at the University of Baltimore.

At one point, I was teaching four courses as an adjunct professor. I was phasing out of my full-time job, but I still worked there in the mornings. And then in the afternoon and evenings, I came to Baltimore and taught three journalism courses at Loyola. And two, one each semester, at UB as an adjunct. When UB offered me a tenure track position that was it. That's what I was hoping for, from one of the two schools, and UB made the offer and I gladly accepted.

Angela Koukoui

Great tell us about your time at University of Baltimore; you were here since the mid-90s.

Eric Easton

That's right. I actually started teaching as an adjunct in 1990 and got the full-time appointment, tenure-track appointment in 1993. And the principal reason that I was hired was because the director of the legal writing program at the time was eager to move out of that position and take a more purely faculty role in the school.

And so, replacement was required. And because I had taught legal writing as an adjunct, because I had 20 plus years of management experience in the journalism setting, and because I was used to dealing with writing and editing as a profession, I guess that's why the faculty hired me. So, my first my first task was to manage the legal writing program, but I also taught communications law, as it was called then, at the same time. Over time, we dramatically changed the legal writing program, from an adjunct-taught program to a full-time faculty-taught program. And it was coupled with a doctrinal course, so I ended up also teaching contracts and torts as well as what came to be called Media Law. And legal writing was combined with those.

Angela Koukoui

That's great. So, you've seen a lot of changes in the ways of teaching here. And you actually were here during the transition of it becoming a four-year institution. Did that affect the law program?

Eric Easton

Not perceptibly. I don't know. It might have put a little bit of a strain on resources. But I don't know that for a fact. There was a third-year transition program where third-year liberal arts students could begin law school and finish their fourth year. And that might have had some effect. Otherwise, really, the transition from a two- to four-year university didn't really have a great impact on the law school, I would say.

Angela Koukoui

Okay, so are there any other changes in the university that you observed, if you want to share about any changes that did impact the law school?

Eric Easton

Sure. There were two during my tenure that are, really important. One, I think, from a curricular standpoint, is changing the fundamental basic legal writing program for first-year students from an adjunct-taught program that wasn't taken as seriously by the students as it should have been, to a program where full-time professors were teaching it at the same time as they were teaching a doctrinal subject: torts, contracts, civil procedure, criminal law. I think the education that the students got was much better. They were able to see right at the beginning how skills and doctrine work together in a legal setting. That was one.

The second one, I think, that was really critical, was the new building. That building, the law school building, opened in 2013. And I think it had an incredible effect on the law school. For one thing, the building itself is a high-energy building. When you go in there, and your office is there, and you teach there, you have a view of activity on multiple floors at the same time. It just increases the energy level of everyone in the building.

That was significant. It was also really a point of pride. It's as good as any law school building in the country. And I think that gave us a renewed sense of pride in the law school and the university as well. I think those were probably the two most important developments affecting the law school that occurred while I was there.

Angela Koukoui

Wow. Very interesting. Well, I'm sure you've made a lot of positive changes in the university as well. Do you recall any specific achievements or changes you were a part of? I know, you served on a lot of committees at University of Baltimore.

Eric Easton

So, I seemed to get on every committee there was at one time or another. I won't lay claim to any great achievements. Mostly, my participation and leadership of these committees were fairly routine. I would say that, as the university was just beginning to come to terms with computerization, I headed, for a time, a committee called the Information Management Advisory Committee. And I think I think we were very useful in helping the school make that transition from an analog era to a digital era. Our job, our main job was basically to recommend the allocation of funds that were set aside for that transitional process.

And it would amount to several hundred thousand dollars per year. And so, we solicited proposals, we reviewed them, we discussed them, and made our recommendations accordingly. I also led the Institutional Review Board for a while. There again, it's a matter of keeping things going. Faculty members and departments would apply for grants or proposed research projects. The Institutional Review Board's task is to make sure that any project involving human subjects was properly done. This is a legacy, if you will, of the Tuskegee fiasco, years ago, the syphilis study. Obviously, nothing like that was going to happen here.

But this was to make sure that human subjects were respected and so forth. And I think, one tangible outcome in my leadership time, was clarifying an exemption from strict regulations for oral history projects like this one. I don't know if you needed to get IRB approval to do this project or not. It was our recommended policy at the time that oral histories really didn't require the kind of close IRB scrutiny that other human subjects-projects required.

I headed the University Faculty Senate for a while. I was on all kinds of committees to- once a marketing committee to rebrand the university. I had a lot of experience at the university level. But no striking achievements at that time. I'm also experienced with law school committees, of course, and also, in the other direction, with the Bar Association, and so forth. I did head the Bar Association's Committee on Legal Education and Admission to the Bar. And in that capacity, I advocated strongly for the uniform bar examination which ultimately came to pass, not through my doing at all, but maybe I helped to ease the way.

Angela Koukoui

Well, do you have any memories or stories about any specific students or colleagues or people that were in leadership?

Eric Easton

I think my colleagues at the law school were really the greatest group of people that I ever worked with. Just a wonderful collegial organization. I was proud to know each and every one of them. A couple of standouts, really, one was Elizabeth Samuels, who's now also retired. She actually is the one who hired me as an adjunct and, and she was running the legal writing program at the time. And she mentored me during the early years that I was there. And the other was Amy Sloan, who was hired to help me expand the legal writing program. And we worked closely for years on that project. But that's just two of many. It's just a wonderful group of people.

Angela Koukoui

Great. So, aside from University of Baltimore, I heard that you visited China as a scholar. What was it like studying law in China? And how is it similar? How is it similar in the justice system there?

Eric Easton

Well, the justice system is not similar at all. As far as that goes, it's quite different. I've had an interest in China since my high school years, and, and all through college and so forth. I was able to go once as a journalist when I was working there, but UB really gave me a lot of opportunities to spend time there. My first really professional opportunity there was as a visiting scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in their Journalism Institute. And, while I was there, along with another professor from another college, we collected the papers of a media law scholar there, who became a good friend. Quite a radical free press advocate, which was difficult to get away with in China at the time.

But we collected his papers, had them translated, edited them and published the collected papers as a book.

After that, I received two federal grants to work with China, the first one was to bring about 20 Chinese scholars and judges and lawyers to UB for six weeks for an intensive program in intellectual property law. We arranged internships for them, and then gave a big symposium. That's all contained in an issue of the UB Intellectual Property Law Journal. The second grant was a faculty exchange in which members of the faculty of Shandong University came to UB for a semester, and members of the UB faculty went to Shandong for a much shorter period of time. I was able to spend an entire semester there, and was able to teach copyright law and US constitutional law to Chinese law students, which was just a wonderful experience. I continue to teach there, by the way, only by zoom these days, because they really can't have international visitors.

Angela Koukoui

So you're very fluent in Mandarin?

Eric Easton

No, I'm not. Their English is way better than my Mandarin. And so, I do all the teaching in English.

Angela Koukoui

Oh, great.

Eric Easton

My Mandarin is quite rudimentary.

Angela Koukoui

So, your framework, you have a PhD in journalism?

Eric Easton

That's right.

Angela Koukoui

So as a member of the journalistic community, both personally and academically, how has that landscape changed over the years?

Eric Easton

Dramatically. For the first 20 years of my career after getting out of the army, I was in an industry that is radically different today than it was then. I was in the newsletter industry, and when I joined the company, it was called Business Publishers Incorporated. When I joined that company, we had five business newsletters for which we did the reporting, the writing, the editing, the printing, the mailing, and everything. And it was a very, obviously, paper intensive process. We did have electric typewriters, I will say; we were that advanced. In about 20 years, we grew the company to about 50 newsletters from the original five.

I went from reporter to editor to editorial director to Vice President to publisher to, I don't know, whatever title I needed to have at the moment. But you could see that over those 20 years, things were changing. We got our first computer for circulation management. We got our first word processors. And

soon, it became clear that the whole paper orientation of that industry would change. As the internet began to take over the world, it certainly took over our business. And companies that made that migration succeeded and thrived. Companies that didn't, ultimately ceased to exist. During that period, I was transitioning from journalism to teaching. Currently, I write book reviews for *Choice Magazine*, which I think you, as a librarian, are probably familiar with. And I have been on the editorial board of the *Daily Record*. But that's about all. I don't do much actual journalism these days, although almost all of my own personal research- a significant part of it- is newspaper research.

Angela Koukoui

Wow. Well, you've had an exciting career from being in the service, journalism, law, to teaching in China. This is a wealth of information that we greatly appreciate. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your career? As you look back at your time here at University of Baltimore?

Eric Easton

I guess the only thing I would want to say is that the 25 plus years that I spent at University of Baltimore were some of the best years of my life. I am actually coming back to teach a course in the fall. But I just had wonderful opportunities. Even the things that we do routinely here: the teaching, the committee work, the time spent with students, even that is very rewarding, very, very rich. But beyond that, there are so many other experiences that have been enabled- for instance, all of my work with China was enabled by the University of Baltimore. I had a Fulbright in 2019, before the pandemic, to do a little teaching in Kosovo. We had summer programs in which I was able to teach in Scotland, in Curacao. I just think the University of Baltimore experience was fantastic. And I hope I'm in a position to continue to give back to it.

Angela Koukoui

Well, that's a lot to learn, because I'm always saying I'm leaving, but I never leave. I'm just here. To hear you say the same thing. It makes sense. Now we have a lot of opportunities here. So, I do appreciate your time with us and talk to you soon.

Eric Easton

My pleasure. Thank you very much. Good luck with this [project].