

Ronald Weich Interview

Thu, Nov 16, 2023, 24:35

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

law school, dean, clinic, lawyers, legislation, senator Kennedy, senator Reid

SPEAKERS

Interviewer: Bedell Terry

Interviewee: Ronald Weich

Bedell Terry

This is Bedell Terry. It's November 16, 2023, at 2pm. I'm with Dean Ronald Weich via the online zoom platform. And we're going to begin our oral history interview for the University of Baltimore stories, the 100th anniversary oral history project. The purpose of this project is to celebrate the University's Centennial by preserving the memory of the those influenced by the University of Baltimore over the years, we will be creating a digital archive and act exhibit and making these recordings available online. Dean Weiss is good to meet you. Nice to meet you. We're going to start off with some background questions. I see you have a very prestigious background here. But we're going to start earlier, where were you born? Where'd you grow up?

Ronald Weich

I was born in New York City. And I grew up in the Bronx, I went to public schools in New York City, all the way through high school. And then I went to Columbia University, also in New York City.

Bedell Terry

And what was your childhood like? It's a small family, large family.

Ronald Weich

I have one brother, who lives in Northern Virginia. So, I see him quite frequently. My parents are no longer with us. But they were very influential. My mom actually was a lawyer. And so, it's no surprise that I'm a lawyer, and had a great opportunity to watch her get great joy out of practicing law and representing clients. So, it definitely was an influence on me. I went to law school, after college at Yale University.

Bedell Terry

And how did you find that? That education in Columbia and Yale difficult?

Ronald Weich

You know, every school is difficult while you're in it, and then you get through it, and you look back, and it's all fine. I got a good education all the way through.

Bedell Terry

And where did you go from there? You graduated from Yale at 83. Right?

Ronald Weich

My first job was in the Manhattan District Attorney's office, I became a prosecutor, before that was a common thing. But I was very anxious to get into court, I had seen my mom in court and watched Perry Mason on television, read the books, and wanted to be a trial lawyer. And being a prosecutor meant I would get into court right away. And I did. And in the four years that I was in the district attorney's office, I had probably about 10 to 12 jury trials. So, it's a great opportunity to learn how to be an advocate. And I enjoyed that experience. Although I decided that I would rather do other things after four years.

Bedell Terry

Who was the district attorney when you were there?

Ronald Weich

Robert Morgenthau, the legendary DA did it for several decades. And he recruited me actively. He was a Yale Law School graduate, so he came to Yale personally to recruit, and he convinced me to come to the office.

Bedell Terry

So, you left the DA's office and

Ronald Weich

I came to Washington, I felt that I could make more of a difference in the lives of the people who I had been prosecuting if I could be involved in policy work. As a prosecutor, you're at the end of a conveyor belt and you see lots of people who were there because of their drug addiction and mental illness and difficult family circumstances. And I wanted to be more involved at the front end, trying to prevent people from becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

So, I came to Washington in 1987. I worked first for the United States Sentencing Commission. It was at that time a new federal agency that was working on sentencing guidelines for the federal courts and criminal justice policy generally. I did that for about a year. And then I went to work in the United States Senate, and I worked with several United States senators.

Ted Kennedy was the chairman of what was then called the Labor and Human Resources Committee, and I was counsel to that committee. Later, I became his chief counsel on the Judiciary Committee. And at a later stage of my career, I worked for Senator Harry Reid, from Nevada, who was first the Minority Leader and then the Majority Leader of the Senate. So, I had some very exciting opportunities to work in the United States Senate in my career.

Bedell Terry

What exactly does the chief counsel do for the senators? Sure.

Ronald Weich

It's actually different roles for the two senators because for Senator Kennedy, I was writing legislation and writing amendments to legislation. I was very much involved in crafting the bills that were coming before the committee. Senator Kennedy had a very ambitious agenda. In all the areas that I worked on, he wanted to expand, for example, drug treatment and mental health services for people. I was later involved on the Judiciary Committee and a number of judicial nominations, Supreme Court nominations.

So, it's always a matter of advising the Senator and working on his behalf to advance legislation, or in some cases, tried to stop legislation. For Senator Reid, I was doing something different because he was the Democratic leader who wasn't involved in each individual bill. But it was more of managing the flow of business on the Senate floor and working on some very interesting and complex inter branch issues where the executive branch had dealings with the legislative branch. And we were obviously protecting the prerogatives of the legislative branch. So, for example, I worked on ethics legislation for Senator Reid, and national security issues, where we were working closely with the security agencies to develop policies that would help protect people.

Bedell Terry

Perhaps you could go back and work on more ethics legislation now.

Ronald Weich

Well, it's a real sad thing for me, as long as you raise that, to see how dysfunctional Congress is now. When I was there, we moved legislation, and there were some bipartisan efforts to improve different aspects of the law. And now it's just a lot of fighting, especially in the House of Representatives, it's really, they can't even pass a budget. But in the Senate, it's also difficult. So, it's, I think there's been a pretty steady disintegration of comity and goodwill in the government. And it's sad for me to see how it is now, because I was there at a better time.

Bedell Terry

Then from the Congress, you went into private practice.

Ronald Weich

I did. It was actually after my time that Senator Kennedy and before my time that Senator Reid, I was a partner at a law firm called Zuckerman Spaeder. It's a very fine law firm, based in Washington, but they have an excellent Baltimore office, which turned out to be very useful when I came to Baltimore to work at the law school here. So, I was working on some litigation and some government relations work for that law firm for the seven or so years that I was there.

Bedell Terry

And that brings you into University of Baltimore, nope one more job. Along the way, one more job.

Ronald Weich

I left Senator Reid's office when I was appointed by President Obama to be an assistant attorney general. This was the beginning of the Obama administration in 2009. And Attorney General Eric Holder, the first attorney general in that administration asked me to work with him. I was the Assistant Attorney General for Legislative Affairs effectively representing the Justice Department in Congress.

So that was a very interesting role, and really sort of a mirror image of what I had been doing for Senator Reid, because now I was in the executive branch, trying to protect executive branch interests and prerogatives against congressional encroachment. So, it's an interesting and somewhat specialized role. And I did that for about three years. Then I came to the University of Baltimore.

Bedell Terry

What drew you to the University of Baltimore?

Ronald Weich

When I was ready to leave the Justice Department I didn't want to go backwards. So, I had worked on Capitol Hill and worked in a law firm, I worked at an agency. I wanted to do something different. And I was exploring different jobs, including higher education. Frankly, I was talking to people about University General Counsel positions. And one conversation led to the question, would I be interested in applying for a law school dean.

And I hadn't thought about that, because I hadn't been a professor. Most law school deans work their way up through the professor ranks. But I was persuaded that there were some law schools that might be interested in someone with my background, and I found out that Baltimore had a vacancy. Because my law firm had an office in Baltimore. I had relationships with people up here in Baltimore, and sort of asked people about the University of Baltimore and I came to understand that it's a very important part of this community.

We are proudly the hometown law school, there are only two law schools in the state of Maryland. There's the University of Maryland law school, and the University of Baltimore, and we are proudly the hometown school. And the more I heard about UB [University of Baltimore] the more excited I was at the possibility I applied not knowing whether they would be interested in me, but in the end, they did hire me, and I've been here since 2012.

Bedell Terry

Now what was the school like when you came originally?

Ronald Weich

Well, it was already a well-established school. You know, it really was the start of the University of Baltimore in 1925. There was a law school then because the university was specifically a law school and a business school. We've seen the 1925 brochure, and it advertises it as legal and business education for the working men and women of Baltimore. But it was only a night school, people would come to school after a full day's work elsewhere. In the 1970s, it became ABA [American Bar Association] accredited, and the day program began. And over the years since then, it grew in

reputation and stature and the credentials of the incoming students. But when I came here, there was actually a fair bit of turmoil, my predecessor had engaged in a pretty public fight with the university about resources for the law school. And he ended up not staying in the job, there was an interim dean for a year.

And so, when I came in, we needed to stabilize the relationship between the Law School and the University and stabilize the budget and enrollment. And over the years I've been here, I think we've accomplished that it's a very strong law school, now, we have a healthy relationship with the university, we are well resourced, the enrollment is quite stable, and our students are doing very well. So, I'm very proud of the stability that I brought to the law school in my 12 years as dean.

Bedell Terry

Are most of your students coming from other schools, or do you have a good representation of graduates from the University of Baltimore?

Ronald Weich

I would say most from other schools, but at least a good steady stream of University of Baltimore undergraduates who want to pursue law degrees. We attract students really from all over Maryland, including students from College Park, and Towson University, historically black colleges and universities and other schools.

But certainly, one reason why undergraduates come to the University of Baltimore, is the fact that we have a law school, and they can be exposed to legal education. And we have, we contribute to the pre-law program. So, there are quite a few University of Baltimore graduates in our law school, and they are quite successful. So, it's a good relationship with the undergraduate program.

Bedell Terry

Was there any impact on the law school when University of Baltimore went to a four-year program rather than a two-year program?

Ronald Weich

The four-year program was already in place when I started in 2012. So I can't contrast it with an earlier time. But I don't think it has a tremendous effect on the law school. Remember, we're only going to accept law applicants who have completed their college education or are about to complete their college education. So, one way or another, we're looking at the seniors, whether they've gone through four years at the University of Baltimore, or two years after, say, two years at a community college one way or another, we're recruiting and matriculating students who have completed their college education.

Bedell Terry

Now, in the interim, since 2012, what changes have you seen in law school?

Ronald Weich

Well, we've grown the programming in some significant respects. The school always had very strong clinical education. This is where law students are representing clients under faculty supervision as a way to prepare for legal practice. The clinics have grown and improved in my time here, we're now ranked sixth best in the country of all 200 law schools, we're number six. And we've added, for example, a veteran's advocacy clinic, a criminal defense clinic, we incubated a Human Trafficking Prevention Project, it was something that started as a clinic here. And now it's spun off to be an independent entity. And over the years, we've had other interesting clinics, including a legal data and design clinic, and a pretrial justice clinic.

So, in lots of ways, we've expanded the offerings for students in that area. We've also established a couple of other new programs. We have a criminal justice reform center, and center on the law of intellectual property and technology. So, in all these ways, the program of legal education is more comprehensive in the time that I've been here.

Then, as I say, the students are well qualified to come to law school and they do very well with employment. Our students get, for example, a very significant number of judicial clerkships within the Maryland State Judiciary. More than a third of the judges in the state of Maryland are graduates of the University of Baltimore law school. And the judges love to hire UB [University of Baltimore] students. They know that students are hardworking, and good problem solvers. And so, I hear all the time from judges that they like to hire our students. And then it continues as the students move through the ranks of clerkship, they then go on to be successful lawyers and sometimes judges themselves. So, it's a very successful program, I would say.

Bedell Terry

Now, what's the ratio between night school and day school?

Ronald Weich

The part-time program, the students who come at night, that was where the law school started. Now, it's about 25% of the students are part time students at night, because they're only here at night. It's a slower progress through the course of study. And basically, they're here for four years. Whereas the full-time day students are here for three years. But after the first year, there's a lot of flexibility. Night students sometimes take day classes, day students take night courses and vice versa if it makes sense for their schedule.

Many of them are working in clerkships and externships. And they need to kind of build their schedule around other experiences. So, we pride ourselves on that flexibility. But interestingly, we're working to make the evening program even more flexible by taking advantage of online technology like this. We learned during the global pandemic that we could teach students online.

But we don't just set up a zoom camera on the kitchen table.

Classes are being designed in a very sophisticated interactive way to make sure that the online experience is just as good as an in-person experience. And we don't want to turn into an online law school. But we want to give those evening students especially more flexibility, maybe they come to

campus two nights a week instead of four nights a week. And so that's a program we're in the process of developing.

Bedell Terry

And considering your multi-faceted experience, not only as Dean of the University of Baltimore law school, but also as a member of the Federal sentencing reporters advisory board, and trustee for the Vera Institute. How have these roles influenced how you lead the University of Baltimore law school.

Ronald Weich

It's interesting the couple of roles that you just mentioned. I was, yes, there's a publication called the Federal Sentencing Reporter and I was on the advisory board there. And then I worked with the Vera Institute and the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law. These are issues that I've been involved in throughout my career. And being a dean has given me the opportunity to bring those experiences to the next generation of young soon to be lawyers.

And I have been able to kind of open up opportunities, job opportunities, and course opportunities in areas that I care about. I've also taught some myself, having worked in Congress, I taught a class on legislative process, and one point taught a class on comparative legislative process. So, I've tried to bring my prior professional experiences to the law students who I serve as Dean. And I would say all of my professional experiences inform the kind of leadership that I bring to the job as Dean tried to model and really emulate the kind of leadership that I saw from others throughout my career.

Bedell Terry

And how have how have these positions influenced organizational changes in the University of Baltimore?

Ronald Weich

Well, I have had prior leadership roles and developed what I consider my, you know, the most effective leadership structure that I work in. And really what I want to do is deputize some key teammates and make sure that they know everything I know. And so, I have the ability to hand off projects to others.

So, I have a very strong leadership team, I believe. My Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, currently Professor Colin Starger, my Associate Dean for Administration currently Joy Gaslevic, who is herself a University of Baltimore graduate. Her predecessor, Vicki Schultz, also graduated from UB in the late 80s. So, I've always had people around me who are strong leaders themselves, and I really tried to delegate to be most effective, because so many things are happening in the law school once and I can only be in one place at once.

So, I need to have strong teammates. I value good communication and listening carefully, respectfully to other viewpoints. I tried to make decisions based on the best information that I have. But sometimes I have to change course, if I made an incorrect decision. So, all of those are some of the leadership lessons that I learned from prior jobs and from watching prior bosses.

Bedell Terry

And in your time at University of Baltimore, well, what's been your what's been your biggest takeaway as you're getting ready to leave the position?

Ronald Weich

Well, that's true. You mentioned the fact that I'm ready to leave, I've announced that this will be my last year as dean of this law school, I hope to continue in a leadership role. But we'll see how that goes. And my biggest takeaway, I think, is the value of legal education. Now, obviously, I went through a legal education because I'm a licensed lawyer. But I don't think you appreciate it as much as a student just trying to get through.

But as a dean, I really see the big picture of how legal education is structured to arm this next generation of lawyers with the skills that they need to be effective in a very complex environment. Obviously, the practice of law is changing dramatically because of technology, and other market forces. And then, so many institutions in our society are under stress. And the legitimacy of many of our democratic institutions is being questioned. And lawyers are at the heart of addressing those concerns and helping to protect and improve the institutions of our democracy. So, I've come to really value legal education and therefore value the role that I have in keeping the Law School strong, because I think it's so important for the wider society.

Bedell Terry

And as we're coming to the end of the interview is there anything else you'd like to say about your career, as you look back on your time at UB [University of Baltimore]?

Ronald Weich

I just love it. I'm very, very fond of this law school and this community. I think the University of Baltimore School of Law has a great role, a vital role in not just the Baltimore community, but the Maryland legal community. And in the wider region. We have some fabulous faculty members publishing impactful scholarships, we educate these students in the classroom in a very intentional way, there's a lot of thought to how best to educate law students. And I am just so proud of the work that we do, and how it affects in a positive way the community around us. So, all of that is something that just makes me very proud and happy.

I love my job. I love coming to school every day. As you see behind me the image of the John and Francis Angeles Law Center. It's a beautiful building. We opened it in 2013. During my deanship, we had ceremonies that featured speeches by then Vice President Biden, Justice Elena Kagan, and Chief Judge Robert Bell at the Maryland Court of Appeals, it's now called the Maryland Supreme Court. But at the time, it was the Maryland Court of Appeals.

And I was very proud to bring Chief Judge Bell who's always been a wonderful contributor to the work of the law schools here in Maryland. And he spoke when we opened the building. So, you know, this building and the school itself, are anchor anchors in this community were very important features of this community. And I hope I've contributed to keeping those aspects of the law school strong and making sure that our students are getting the best possible education that they can.

Bedell Terry

Well, Dean, we thank you for your time. Thank you. I've enjoyed this been very informative. And it's very useful, as said, let us know about the University of Baltimore law school.

Ronald Weich

Well, thank you. We're proud of our, the role that we play within the University of Baltimore. And I'll just say happy birthday UB [University of Baltimore] as we move to 2025.

Bedell Terry

Thank you. Thanks.