

## Amicus Curious

## Attorney helps expand school program

By Bethany Krajelis  
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Michael D. Schlesinger said practicing transactional law requires a certain art.

"A good transactional lawyer has a specific set of skills," he said before rattling off a slew of characteristics and abilities, such as being able to solve problems, work with others and understand, assess and implement clients' objectives while earning their trust and respect.

"There is a difference between the law as written and the law as applied in court," he said. "A good transactional lawyer understands that."

After nearly four decades of mastering the trade at Robbins, Salomon & Patt Ltd., Schlesinger, 66, left the firm this summer to join The John Marshall Law School, where he organized a new program to teach the art of being a transactional lawyer.

He worked as an adjunct professor at John Marshall since 2005, but took on a full-time position this year as the director of the new Business Transactions Externship Program (BTEP).

The program, which he wanted to implement since about 2007, aims to educate law students on the skills required to be transactional lawyers by working on real-world cases that not only benefit them, but area businesses in need.

Schlesinger said students enrolled in the BTEP provide pro bono business and transactional legal work to not-for-profits and businesses with limited financial resources.

The idea to create such a program picked up traction after Schlesinger created and began teaching a course, "Transactional Law and Representing the Business Client" last year. He taught corporate law since 2005.

Schlesinger said he designed the transactional law course to teach students lessons not covered in textbooks, like how to form a business or shareholders' agreement for clients as well as how to work with clients on these matters.

The course offered 12 seats during the first semester Schlesinger taught it and by the third, the enrollment doubled to keep up with demand.

Ralph Ruebner, associate dean of academic affairs at John Marshall, said Schlesinger "proved the students are starving for this."

"There is a real demand. We didn't know how deep that interest was until we started," he said.



Michael D. Schlesinger

"Now, we see how eager our students are and how they have embraced this. We are very happy about it."

Ruebner said the BTEP falls in line with a national trend that followed the release of a report by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

The report, released a few years ago, criticized the nation's law schools for not providing students with more practical skills during their education.

Ruebner said John Marshall focused many of its clinics on litigation over the years and decided to also start offering a similar opportunity for practical learning to students interested in the business and transactional legal world.

"Ultimately, I would like to see us have a full operational clinic," Ruebner said. "And to do that, we need to talk about some major fundraising."

Ruebner said transforming the BTEP, which is currently funded by the law school, into a clinic would cost several hundred thousand dollars. That would cover the cost of building it a home and paying the salaries of its staff.

As the BTEP's director, Schlesinger is the only one right now supervising the students enrolled in the program.

Next semester, however, he will be joined by five additional faculty supervisors, all of whom Schlesinger said he knows from his days as a transactional lawyer.

"I want the BTEP to be a capstone to the law students' education and an inspiration to them as lawyers to engage in public service," Schlesinger said.

Like Ruebner, Schlesinger also mentioned the need for donations, grant money and other sources of financial support to build the program into a full clinic.

He said the program benefits everyone involved, from the students who learn practical skills from real cases to the clients who receive pro bono work. He also said it helps the law school, which can say it offers such a program, and local economies that might get a boost from one of the businesses assisted by the program's students.

Schlesinger said Project HOPE (Helping Other People Evolve) Inc. was one of the

BTEP's first clients this past summer. The not-for-profit organization has been mentoring, tutoring and providing childcare and life skills to Chicago's youth for about seven years.

Marlene Allen, the group's executive director, said one of her youth workers met Schlesinger, who told him to pass along his contact information because he was a lawyer looking to help not-for-profits.

"I called Mike and the rest is history," Allen said, explaining that Schlesinger and his students helped Project HOPE through the legal process of obtaining additional child care licenses from the state.

"I don't know if we would have been able to continue the work we do without the help and services of what the law school has done for us," Allen said.

Jim Wigoda, a 3L at John Marshall, said he began his work with the BTEP this past summer after taking Schlesinger's transactional law course.

"It has been amazing," he said. "I'm pretty confident in saying it is the best thing I've done in law school."

He said the program taught him the "things that you just can't teach in the classroom," like interacting with clients and working through documents and forms that textbooks mention without explaining.

Wigoda said he looks forward to taking the externship program again next semester, when it will be expanded with additional staff supervisors.

R. Kymn Harp, shareholder at Robbins, Salomon & Patt Ltd., who focuses his practice on transactional law, will be one of the adjunct professors assigned to work in the BTEP.

He worked with Schlesinger at the firm for about three years before Schlesinger left to join John Marshall full-time.

Harp said the BTEP is a program he wishes was around when he attended John Marshall for law school.

"Not only do I wish I had something like this in law school, but I'm very, very happy law students are going to get this experience," he said. "It's just, I think, a great opportunity to fill the practical void that students have today."