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Newsroom

PBN: 'RWU is a Leader in Marine Law'

RWU Law "has quietly become a national leader in the field of marine law, a specialty highlighted by the Gulf oil spill," Providence Business News reports.

The June 28, 2010 "Focus: LAW" edition of the *Providence Business News* asserts that ["RWU is a leader in marine law."](#) By PBN Staff Writer Denise Perreault.

June 28, 2010: Roger Williams University School of Law has quietly become a national leader in the field of marine law, a specialty whose importance is highlighted by the massive oil spill in the Gulf.

The Bristol law school is one of only a few in the country, professors say, that offers students the opportunity to concentrate on ocean law, earn a joint degree in the law and marine affairs, and become research fellows at government agencies in Washington, D.C., that will shape maritime policy for years to come.

The law school is one of just "five or six" in the country that focus on marine and coastal law, according to **Susan Farady, director of the Marine Affairs Institute** at Roger Williams, and one of only three universities that offer joint degrees in the law and marine affairs, the latter with the University of Rhode Island.

It is the only law school in New England to be part of the national Sea Grant Legal Program, which hires law students to conduct legal research for businesses, nonprofits and government entities, according to Farady.

“Because we’re one of only a few in this field, students interested in marine affairs seek us out,” she said, estimating that 10 to 15 percent of each incoming class “come here just for the Marine Affairs Institute.” Each law school class averages about 200 students.

Other issues besides the mammoth oil spill in the Gulf demand the attention of attorneys fully trained in marine law.

Fisheries management is undergoing a “revolution” nationwide, Farady noted, while offshore energy uses such as wind power increasingly dominate national discussions. Matters involving the ocean are like “the last canary in the coal mine of environmental law,” she suggested. “There has never been a greater need than right now” for well-qualified environmental attorneys.

Furthermore, two recent law school graduates – **Kathleen Haber** and **Christina Hoefsmit, both 2010 graduates** – were among 43 in the nation recently designated Knauss Fellows. Named after the National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration (NOAA) chief John A. Knauss, the fellowship program matches qualified college graduates with government agencies specializing in maritime law.

Noting that most fellows tend to be graduate students who majored in the sciences, Farady said this year only four law school graduates in the nation became Knauss Fellows. “And so, we’ve got half of them,” Farady said with a satisfied chuckle. In the last five years, the law school has had five Knauss Fellows, one of the highest placement rates in the nation, according to Alan Desbonnet, assistant director of Rhode Island Sea Grant.

What all this means to law school students and the nation’s maritime policies can perhaps best be illustrated by the experiences of two recent graduates: Haber and **Nicholas Battista, who graduated in 2008** with a law degree from Roger Williams and a master’s degree in marine affairs from URI.

The 28-year-old Battista, a native of Portland, Maine, currently works as a legislative aide in the Washington, D.C., office of U.S. Rep. Chellie Pingree, a Democrat from Maine. He began working there as a Knauss Fellow in 2009 and has stayed on as a full-time employee.

Receiving a joint degree from Roger Williams and URI, he said, helped him take what he learned in law school and apply it in a practical way to marine affairs. “I came to understand the policy process better,” he told *Providence Business News*.

Among the legislative measures he currently is working on for Pingree is a bill that would preserve and protect “working waterfronts,” he said, so that access to the water would be guaranteed for those businesses that need it, such as marinas and fisheries.

A second measure he helped prepare for Pingree would require British Petroleum to pay royalties on the oil spilled, which would go to the U.S. government to pay in part for water conservation efforts. Normally, royalties are not required in the event of spills. Pingree introduced the bill in the House June 15 and action is pending.



Kate Haber, 28, grew up in Ohio. She is studying for the bar exam and, after receiving her juris doctorate at Roger Williams, is finishing her last semester for her URI degree in the joint program.

She spent three years as a deckhand on one of the Tall Ships operated by the Sea Education Association Inc. in Woods Hole, Mass., from 2004 to 2007. “My love of the ocean and the marine environment stemmed from that experience,” she said.

She is an executive fellow in the Knauss program – versus a legislative fellow – so she knows that she will be working at a government agency in the nation’s capital as of February, when her fellowship officially begins.

She is particularly interested in marine renewable energy, she said, such as wind power, tidal power and hydropower. Her joint degree and the fellowship are “ideal” steps along the path toward her future career, “helping shape the nation’s ocean policy,” she said.

The Gulf oil spill certainly has crystallized the importance of marine law and piqued the interest of her students, Farady said. “It has really put our issues front and center,” she said, “because it has to do with liability, damages and making responsible decisions about all the resources in the ocean.”

She is teaching a summer class on ocean policy and usually, she said, students do not become aware of the complexities of government’s management of the ocean’s resources until around the third class. This summer, she said, questions about U.S. Minerals Management Service arose in the first 10 minutes of her first class. •