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Law School News

Groundbreaking Judicial Scholar to Deliver RWU Law Commencement Address

Professor Lee Epstein, leading scholar in judicial decision-making, longtime RI corrections chief A.T. Wall, and top trial lawyer Peter DiBiase will receive honorary degrees during May 17 ceremony.



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BRISTOL, R.I., April 10, 2019 – A leading scholar on judicial decision-making will deliver the commencement address to 130 law students during the Roger Williams University School of Law commencement ceremony on Friday, May 17, 2019, as the state’s only law school celebrates its 25th year.

One of the nation's top experts on judicial decision-making, Professor Lee Epstein of Washington University in St. Louis, will deliver the commencement address and receive an

honorary degree. Former Rhode Island Department of Corrections Director A.T. Wall II and Rhode Island trial lawyer Peter A. DiBiase also will receive honorary degrees from the law school.

Lee Epstein is the Ethan A.H. Shepley Distinguished University Professor at Washington University in St. Louis. Her research and teaching interests center on law and legal institutions, especially the behavior of judges. She is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Political and Social Science. She also serves as Co-Director of the Center for Empirical Research in the Law, Lecturer in Law at the University of Chicago, and a Principal Investigator of the U.S. Supreme Court Database project. A recipient of 12 grants from the National Science Foundation, Professor Epstein has authored or co-authored more than 130 articles and essays and 18 books, including “The Choices Justices Make.”

“Lee Epstein is a rare academic,” said Dean Michael J. Yelnosky. “Her research has been remarkably influential. She has changed our understanding of the factors that influence judicial behavior. But there is more. Her use of empirical methods to reveal those factors was on the leading edge of a revolution in the use of empirical methods in American law schools, a practice that has now become mainstream. And although those accomplishments are worthy of honoring at our commencement exercises, there is even more. She is an entertaining speaker – her enthusiasm for her subject is palpable, her insights are keen, and she is precise and witty. I look forward to having her with us as we celebrate the accomplishments and the promise of the members of the Class of 2019.”

A.T. Wall was the long-time director of the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (his 18 years in that role made him the longest-serving corrections director in the United States). He retired in 2018. His work in the corrections field began in 1976, when he served as a line probation officer in New Haven, Conn. After graduating from Yale Law School, he worked in the New York District Attorney’s office and the Vera Institute of Justice before joining the Rhode Island Department of Corrections, where he spent the remainder of his career. A champion for innovations in the field, he set policy direction and oversaw institutions with some 13,000 pretrial and sentenced admissions a year.

Peter A. DiBiase, Esq., is one of the preeminent trial lawyers in Rhode Island. His 54-year legal career began at the Rhode Island Public Defender’s Office as a summer clerk. After his graduation from law school, he was hired as an Assistant Public Defender and served as the Rhode Island Mental Health Advocate. He served with distinction in both positions, clearly demonstrating his commitment to public service. Upon leaving the Public Defender’s Office, Peter went into private practice. He has served as a member of the Supreme Court Disciplinary Board, the Supreme Court’s Committee on Character and Fitness, and the Judicial Tenure Commission. He received the Rhode Island Bar Association’s 2016 Ralph P. Semonoff Award for Professionalism.

The law school commencement ceremony will take place on Friday, May 17, under the tent on the main athletic field. The processional steps off at 12:20 p.m., and the ceremony begins at 12:30 p.m.

The next day, U.S. Senator Jack Reed will deliver the commencement address to more than 1,200 students during the Roger Williams University undergraduate commencement ceremony on Saturday, May 18, 2019. The university will also present honorary degrees to civil rights leader Clifford R. Montiero, who marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and served as president of the NAACP Providence branch for a decade, and to Marcia Morris, Vice Chair of the RWU Board of Trustees and a Presidential Search Committee co-chair who served in executive management and chief legal officer roles during her career.