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June 28, 2019

Law School News

NCDC Holds Trial Practice Institute at RWU Law

Nearly 300 defense lawyers from across the country convened in Bristol for a transformative two-week training session. A second session follows in July.



June 28, 2019
Michael M. Bowden

For the past two weeks, the National Criminal Defense College (NCDC) has been conducting its annual Trial Practice Institute at Roger Williams University School of Law, and the verdict is in – the session was a resounding success.

“We love it here,” said NCDC co-dean Natasha Silas. “From the warm welcome we received from your dean and staff, to the excellent facilities, the delicious food and the mostly beautiful weather, it’s been a wonderful experience.”

This was the NCDC’s first time holding its annual summer conference at RWU Law. A second session is coming up in late July. Between them, the two sessions will bring some 75 faculty

members and more than 200 seasoned defense attorneys to Bristol from across the country, as well as Canada and Mexico. For the past 34 years, the institute had been hosted by Mercer University School of Law, in Macon, Ga.

“We were drawn to RWU Law because of its outstanding commitment to public service and its reputation for excellence,” Silas said. “We also share RWU’s belief in the power of experiential learning.”

RWU Law Dean Michael Yelnosky shared Silas’ enthusiasm.

“Hosting the NCDC Trial Practice Institute is a perfect fit for RWU Law,” he said. “We have great depth in and a commitment to criminal law and procedure, public interest law and experiential education. Many of our alumni are public defenders or criminal defense lawyers in private practice, and many are prosecutors. We believe, as does NCDC, that effective representation is essential to equal justice under law, and I am proud that we are in a position to welcome them to Bristol and to Rhode Island.”

A Transformative Experience

The Trial Practice Institute is a two-week-long, transformative experience for public, private, military and federal defense attorneys. Participants are challenged to master courtroom skills by attending lectures, performing case exercises with live professional actors, and by watching demonstrations by NCDC’s nationally renowned faculty.

“Our goal is to empower passionate and committed defense lawyers to become the most formidable client-centered courtroom advocates they can be,” Silas said.

Faculty members likewise hail from coast to coast – representing the judiciary, law schools, private practice, and state and federal public defender offices. Associate Professor Tara Allen, an RWU Law faculty member and an alumna of NCDC, joined the institute’s visiting faculty for summer 2019.

“I like to think that I am effective at creating learning environments in which students feel safe pushing themselves beyond self-imposed limitations to master new skills,” Allen said. “My teaching is fueled by a core belief that the accused, especially the indigent, deserve to be defended by non-mediocre, highly-skilled trial attorneys who will tenaciously challenge the prosecution inside the courtroom. I formed that belief at NCDC.”

Professor Allen noted that the term “transformative” is not an exaggeration.

“Fourteen years ago, NCDC’s Trial Practice Institute transformed both my criminal defense practice and my style of teaching,” she said. “I left the Trial Practice Institute more dedicated to my craft and intensely strategic in terms of my approach to examining witnesses in evidentiary hearings and trials.”

These changes stayed with her.

“NCDC unleashed my fire,” she said. “And during the course of my career, I have generously shared that fire in the classroom, teaching new and less experienced attorneys, borrowing techniques from the likes of NCDC instructors Tony Natale, Jeff Robinson, and Cynthia Roseberry. I teach by applying the experiential, on-your-feet approach that NCDC used to teach me. It has been one of my career goals to join the NCDC faculty. This summer I attained that goal. After years of being a Federal Defender, I am a professor of law at RWU, on the visiting faculty of NCDC, and standing shoulder to shoulder with my teachers. What a privilege, indeed.”

Allen, along with numerous other participants, called out a keynote by Robinson on “Race Matters” as a highlight of the session. Robinson will return to speak at the July session.

Local Connections

For two defense lawyers attending the first session – Tim Cook ’10 of the DeKalb County Public Defenders in Atlanta, and Charles “C.B.” Bates ’05 of the Kentucky Department of Public Advocacy in Columbia, Ky. – the institute was a kind of homecoming.

“I loved being back,” said Bates. “I took the opportunity to hit some of my old haunts. I have some great memories here, and one of my favorites was participating in the Criminal Defense Clinic with Andy Horwitz during my last semester.”

And the institute?

“Well, I’ve been doing this for a while,” Bates said. “So it’s been a chance for me to recharge and take things to the next level. Now I’m heading back, ready to hit hard. The institute helped me rethink my approach to preparing a defense. To be bold. Take risks. Win trials. It’s all about controlling the narrative.”

Cook agreed.

“It’s really an incredible program,” he said. “Because our job is so challenging, there’s often no room for error, no time to step back and reassess what you’re doing. This program gave you some room to rethink your strategies and practice some different approaches. It surrounds you with intelligent and thoughtful people, and challenges you to reevaluate what works and what doesn’t, from jury selection to closing argument.”

And at some levels, that reevaluation is as much philosophical as practical.

“It encourages you to shift the way you look at your clients, at their unique stories and their common threads,” Cook said. “It reinvigorates and refreshes your approach to public defense, and your ability to empathize with your clients.”

Current RWU Law students Emily Savino and Alexa Story – both rising 2Ls completing summer internships with the NCDC – say they can readily observe the difference.

“You can actually see a change in how [NCDC participants] carry themselves, how their level of self-confidence rises,” Savino noted.

“It’s a really different perspective to see experienced lawyers coming back to be students again,” added Story. “It definitely adds an extra dimension to my classwork here.”

Another rising 2L, Andrew Morin, who is interning this summer with the Rhode Island Attorney General’s Office in Providence, spent a morning off serving as a juror during some sessions on voir dire.

“It’s especially interesting for me to experience the prosecutor’s perspective at my internship, then to come here and experience the defense perspective,” he said. “You need smart, honest and good people on both sides.”

Alex Bowden, a rising senior undergraduate at Roger Williams, also served as a juror during those sessions.

“I can’t say that I’m seriously considering law school,” he noted. “But if anything could talk me into it, this could.”