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Transcript: Welcome Address

American University Washington College of Law Disability Rights Law Clinic

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WELCOME ADDRESS

ASSISTING LAW STUDENTS WITH
DISABILITIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
BRASS TACKS

WELCOME ADDRESS
Washington, D.C.
Thursday, March 8, 2007

SPEAKERS:
CLAUDIO GROSSMAN
Dean, Washington College of Law

DAVID JAFFE
Associate Dean, Office of Student Affairs,
Washington College of Law

PROCEEDINGS:

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CLAUDIO GROSSMAN: Good morning, everyone. I am Claudio Grossman, the Dean of the law school, and I want to welcome all of you to American University's Washington College of Law for this important conference on Assisting Law Students with Disabilities in the Twenty-First Century: Brass Tacks.

This event is part of our annual Founders Celebration, which we host each spring in honor of two pioneering women, Ellen Spencer Mussey and Emma Gillett, who founded our law school in 1896 with the conviction that legal education was the key to achieving gender equality.

Throughout our annual Founders Celebration we offer approximately sixty engaging programs on a wide variety of far-ranging and fascinating topics related to business, human rights, intellectual property, international trade, gender, national security, health, and so on.

There is hardly an issue that lacks a legal component in today's society, and we see it as a part of the strategic vision of the law school's function to enlighten the general public about those legal dimensions.

Also, this conference is an avenue for academia to explore essential issues, as well as a possibility to engage in action, and from that perspective we see that we are performing an important public service. Many of these conferences are podcasted and webcasted to ensure the exposure of the thinking of this conference and to reach the broader public.

Events at this conference are important in part because these discussions bring us together and they leave us with extensive shared experience and knowledge in the various topics.

We believe our school is a fitting place for today's discussion and conference. Our school is committed to assisting students with disabilities to ensure that they excel and contribute to the overall experience, the vocational experience, of everyone; that it is a tremendous asset for all students.

Our school engages in this initiative of perfecting the rights of people with disabilities through, for example, our Disability Rights Law Clinic, which was established in the fall of 2005. The clinic has exposed us to the wide variety of substantive ailments and values related to people dealing with

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mental and physical disability. Cases involve special location issues with the American Disabilities Act and the intersection between the criminal justice system and mental disabilities.

We owe that clinic to the leadership, knowledge, and dedication of Professor Robert Dinerstein, who I am sure might be here in the room. Thank you, Professor Dinerstein, for what you are doing for the law school.

Turning to today's conference, we have five exciting expert panels on the following topics: Best Practices, Clinical and Externship Programs, The Bar Examination, Career and Professional Development, and Working with Difficult Issues.

We are also looking forward to lunch with our guest speaker, Leona David Tatel of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. Judge Tatel has an outstanding record of litigation and achievement in the legal profession and we are honored to have him with us today.

Before we begin, I would like to thank our families and motivators for sharing their time and extensive knowledge and experience with us. I would especially like to thank the Office of Student Affairs and Dean David Jaffe. David has been a very powerful force, innovator, and influence committed to this and other topics, and this law school has been blessed by his presence. None of you would be here had it not been for David's initiative in spearheading this conference.

Let me finish my comments by saying the following: As the former president of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, I had the opportunity to participate in some exciting cases involving the areas which we address today. I remember one case, involving an airline in a Latin American country where the black people had to pay twice to have a ticket, because the airline said they could not fly alone. We prosecuted this violation of the principal of equality under the American Convention on Human Rights. I can go on with more cases.

I had the impression, however, while handling those cases that the issues were not restricted to those narrowly defined before us. These were not merely issues involving a person that had to pay twice exclusively, or about a person who could not have access to a location because the architecture of the school was not proper for that purpose.

This was about developing and realizing democracy and the opportunities for the emolument of all of us. I look forward to success with confidence. I wish you success. We feel enriched with your presence. We thank you for being here, and congratulations for this initiative. Thank you very much.

DAVID JAFFE: Thank you, Claudio. I have got to move this back a

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little so our friends over here can see the entire panel. How is that? Is that better?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Great.

DAVID JAFFE: Okay. Welcome and good morning to everybody. I am the aforementioned David Jaffe, Dean of Student Affairs here at the law school, and I am absolutely thrilled to be here and to have all of you here, to be here among you.

Today's conference is really, at the end of the day, about us. In working for the students it is about us as student service professionals, the large composition of the audience today, student service professionals, clinic professors, other professors working on behalf of students, largely multitasking responsibilities, and thankless responsibilities at that, but ones in which we continue to endeavor, to learn more about and to deepen our appreciation of working with the students, and we hope indeed that is what today is going to be about.

The audience again, to my extreme pleasure, is composed of roughly—reflecting forty-one law schools from twenty states across the country, and I'm just absolutely thrilled about that. To my knowledge, this is the only national conference that has been set up to work and dedicated solely on addressing issues with law students and disabilities, and we hope that this is a trend that we can set up as a tradition, whether it is here or it is picked up by another law school or law schools as we go forward, because mainly again, student service professionals do not get the opportunity to come together often enough and address these issues.

ALS has done a wonderful job. But for those of you who work in the front lines of student services, you know how many issues, a myriad of issues, that we have to face, and there is just not enough time in the course of a day or a day and a half to address them, so I am thrilled that we have today to focus on these particular issues.

The pledge, as we started developing this almost a year ago, was for anybody who came here to leave with some deeper appreciation and/or knowledge in the area of working with students with disabilities, and I want to take—in the effort of avoiding that guarantee not being held—two minutes and throw out right off the top a couple of suggestions, things to think about, and then with that we are going to quickly turn the first panel over to Jennifer.

First and foremost, your law school should have a disabilities handbook expressly for law students. It may reflect or be similar to one that you have

in the university setting, but the handbook should, at a minimum, provide the law school's policies on providing accommodations, documentation guidelines with respect to those accommodations, grievance procedures in the event things do not go as well as a student had expected or anticipated, the opportunity to address those situations, and the other services that are provided by the law school, such as counseling, bar exam review, and other things like that.

The handbook is really, beyond just being symbolic, an integral component for any law school to reflect that it is a school that cares about the students who are working through issues of disabilities; so that they know there have been individuals who have been thinking through it as well. So it is clearly more than symbolic.

Second, when possible, the law school ought to have a dedicated disability support professional. I am suggesting that this again should be possible beyond the critical liaison, beyond the individuals who work at your main campus or at your university who are providing that support. The ability to have a professional at the law school, working with those students, again, beyond the symbolic, who provides that front line mechanism for those students to come within the building and to feel that they have the support and the representation when they need it. I know it is not easy in all cases and there are budget restrictions and conditions in that regard, but we have seen that as something that has clearly helped where schools are able to support it.

A couple of additional components; we always recommend, when possible, to deepen your understanding of disability issues—the specific issues that are germane to some of your students, or just some of the general issues that affect students. Again, that is the basis for why we are here today. We were blessed to have pulled together a resource list in that regard as part of your packet beyond the biographies that you have. This is a resource list that was pulled together by our deputy director and my liaison in the Pence Law Library, Adeen Postar, who I want to acknowledge and thank for the time that she put in to pull that together. There is some really good scholarship that has been done by our colleagues and by others, and so we hope, whether it is on the plane ride home or over spring break or during the summer, you can start to deepen your appreciation in that regard.

I would also recommend, and I know this is sometimes a tough one, firsthand knowledge. We have been working on this for a couple of years here; if you have the possibility of developing a scholarship in your law school for a student or students with disabilities, take the time to do that—again, beyond symbolic. At a minimum, the symbolic notion that you are providing that support, but again, the actual and the practical. Those

students with disabilities often will come in with additional financial needs and obligations, and the opportunity to help defray the costs in that regard is something that can be extra-special for those students.

I would also strongly urge you to consider becoming a resource contact person at your school for the National Organization of Law Students with Disabilities. Many of you probably have not heard about this. This is an organization of students that started coming together just last summer. We actually had the pleasure of receiving them here in January for a working conference of about fifty law students from across the country who are dedicated to creating a national organization for law students with disabilities.

They are dead set on making this happen, and I know what they want and what they need are contact individuals such as ourselves at the various law schools who can help put them in touch with students, with recent graduates, to force those networks.

There is a green sheet I see that some of you have up and there is a flyer out on the table outside. We urge you to pick it up and try to follow up with that upon conclusion of the conference.

Finally, as I guess I said off the top, if you find that today is helpful for you, that you consider, down the road, whether it is next year or the year beyond, taking on the—really, the excitement, not the task—but the excitement of hosting a conference like this yourself. Let us make this an ongoing national conference by having individuals involved. Let us move it over to the Midwest, to the West Coast, and have other schools involved and keep it going so that we can bring ourselves together for these types of issues and conversations thereof as we go out.

So with that, I think I have said enough. My hope is to continue to deepen the friendships with some of you I have gotten to know already and to forge some new friendships with some of you with whom I have exchanged e-mails, over the course of the day. Just on an administrative note, I will be here throughout the day and look forward to hearing each of the panels.

Any issues that you may have, or if you need any assistance, please let me know or tell anyone from the able bodied special events department which is helping us today.

And with that, it is my pleasure to turn the microphone over to Jennifer. Thank you very much.