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—Matthew Johnson 16L



IHL Clinic shines brighter for finding two mates

BY SUSAN CARINI 04G

As Laurie Blank — clinical professor of law and director of Emory Law’s International Humanitarian Law (IHL) Clinic — headed to a conference in fall 2014, she did so believing that the IHL Clinic held claim to being one of a kind since its establishment in 2007. Other than perhaps the closely-related International Justice Clinic at the University of California-Irvine School of Law, there weren’t others out there doing clinical work in humanitarian law or, as it is also known, the law of armed conflict. There were clinics focused on human rights but not humanitarian law.

And then a colleague Blank met at that conference unexpectedly held up a mirror. Leiden University has a similar setup — an International Humanitarian Law Clinic established in 2012 as part of its law school’s Kalshoven-Gieskes Forum and Grotius Centre for International Legal Studies, directed by Professor Robert Heinsch. Following the shock of recognition came a delighted promise that the two would stay in touch in order to compare notes.

Six weeks later: same mirror, different colleague. In Israel to speak at a conference, Blank ran into the professor running the newly opened International Criminal and Humanitarian Law Clinic at Radzyner School of Law at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya, Israel, north of Tel Aviv — Professor Yael Vias Gvirsman. The three directors lost no time, as Blank describes it, “talking, imagining, and dreaming.”

Each clinic holds humanitarian law: Emory represents the United States, home to the world’s most active and powerful military and a lead player in counterterrorism operations. Leiden University offers proximity to The Hague, home to the United Nations’ International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. And the IDC, of course, has the distinction of being based in a conflict zone.

The three directors conceived a lofty goal: an international exchange program among the three clinics that would, in essence, help to build the next generation of international lawyers. In the course of a week’s intensive discussions and site visits together, the students

would return to their studies, home countries, and careers with the glimmerings of a robust network. With any luck, 10 or 15 years down the line, now in a position of influence, these individuals should be able to work together to make a real difference in humanitarian law.

Just before Thanksgiving last year, a year's worth of coordination resulted in everyone convening at the IDC — "everyone" being 10 students from Emory, 10 from Leiden, and 15 from the IDC, together with Blank's fellow clinic directors, who never had met.

Six days in Israel and lots to do. Blank wondered if it would take a little while for everyone to feel comfortable. After all, this group of 35 students might have vastly different perspectives depending on their experiences. For instance, the Israeli students had served in the army, as everyone there does following high school. Meanwhile, the Leiden students hailed from many different countries. Nonetheless, says Blank, "it was amazing how quickly the students dove into conversation and bonded with one another."

The plan was for the students to meet with practitioners and experts on the ground working on these issues, and the IDC did not disappoint. There were panel discussions and speakers each day — featuring military, government, and human rights lawyers, the people practicing and implementing the very law the students had been studying all semester in class and project work.

The students were divided into five working groups, each of which had members from the three institutions. Their job was to engage one another and reflect on all that they were hearing and learning. And their responses put Blank over the moon.

"They asked hard questions," she says. "When you think about a body of law focused on making war more humane — protecting civilians, people who are detained, and cultural property — that is advanced citizenship. We took our students from those demanding considerations to the middle of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which certainly was a trial by fire as you drop legal questions into a contentious political arena."

In Blank's view, the students "were the stars of the show." One of them is **Matthew Johnson 16L**, who described the honor of meeting Justice Daphne Barak-Erez following a tour of the Israeli Supreme Court. Granting the visitors a private meeting, she began with a statement — what she does and the work of the court — then opened it up for questions, spending in all about 45 minutes with her rapt audience. That night, the students had the chance to meet and hear from Judge Gabriel Bach, the Holocaust survivor who was a prosecutor in the 1962 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel, a seminal event in the country.

For Johnson, "The primary benefit of this trip is that you can learn about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or about international law and the law of armed conflict, but until you fly to another country and spend time talking to the people who deal with the realities of that conflict on a day-to-day basis, it is difficult to have a true picture of the scope and complexity of the conflict. There is no substitute, no class you can take, that is as valuable as going to a place and interacting with the people there." Next year will find Johnson in the US Army JAG Corps, which he plans to make a career. "It was fascinating," says Johnson, "to do a compare-and-contrast with what military lawyers in Israel face."

Amelia Todd 16L, normally a quiet presence in a group setting, found herself wholly animated. She confesses, "Someone asked me if I was planning to go into investigative journalism, I was asking so many questions." She describes the pace as "exhausting, but in a good way, as students absorbed so much information." Though she happily took a seat on their tour bus next to someone new every time, she admits to being very taken with the Israeli students, who she says, "were living out what we were hearing."

On the last day of their visit came Todd's highlight: a visit to Neve Shalom, located midway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. It is a village where Jews, Arabs, and Christians choose to live together in a coexistence model as well as lead educational programs for coexistence and peace. For someone whose future work will involve a mix of criminal and international work with a human trafficking focus, Todd is determined to embrace good wherever she sees it.

Next year, the members of the three clinics are off to Leiden University and its rich resources in international criminal justice, then a visit to Atlanta — with a field trip to Washington — in year three. Meanwhile, this spring, the three clinics are beginning their first collaborative project, which will be work for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) — considered, says Blank, the premier organization focused on this body of law.

The ICRC wants the students to build case studies of positive compliance with the law from conflicts all over the world. "So often, of course, all you hear about are the violations," says Blank. She supports this direction because, "from a pedagogical standpoint, the students have to understand how the law works in order to know that it was upheld." And she couldn't help but appreciate that spark of hope inherent in the idea of highlighting the good in such desperate situations.



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Blank, clinical professor of law and director of the IHL Clinic