Reaching Out

Experiential Learning: Notre Dame Law Students Learn Beyond the Classroom
In 2004, John Cencich was accepted at Notre Dame Law to pursue his J.S.D. studies. He spent one year in residence at NDLS and another three working on his dissertation, entitled “Crime and War: Piercing the Military Veil Through International Criminal Justice.” His work explored the concept of combatants losing their lawful status if they engage in unlawful behavior, such as robbery.

Cencich brought a unique background to the task: two decades as a police officer and special agent in Michigan and Virginia, followed by four years of service with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, where he led the investigation of Slobodan Milosevic. While writing his dissertation at NDLS, Cencich was advised by Professor Jimmy Gurulé. According to Gurulé, there was a striking quality to the novel concepts involved in Cencich’s project. In Gurulé’s eyes, Cencich was continuing the work that he had begun with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. This time he was just doing it on an academic level.

“When he came to law school, John had the benefit of having worked with this tribunal,” says Gurulé. “He was able to take his own personal experiences and go forward with researching related issues in the field of academia. The issues surrounding the tribunal were something that John cared very deeply about and he was always interested in seeking justice for the crimes that occurred over there.”

For Gurulé, having someone with Cencich’s wealth of experience was an invaluable asset for the university. In particular, he says that students benefited immensely by having someone who had actually experienced the topics discussed in the classroom.

“Most J.D. students come directly to law school from their undergraduate studies, and they really don’t have much real-world experience,” says Gurulé.

“But having someone like John allows the students to be around someone who has been through the things they are studying. It’s not like being around someone who is telling stories from second- or third-hand experience. It really enriches the classroom discussion and students benefit from his perspective. He’s also able to speak from authority and tell people how things actually work.”

While at The Hague, Cencich led investigations, deployed investigators to crime scenes, and ensured the security of investigators in the field. He also co-developed the prosecution theory of Joint Criminal Enterprise, which Cencich says was based on concepts established by NDLS Professor G. Robert Blakey’s RICO Act. The theory extends criminal liability to those who, although they didn’t physically commit the crime themselves, helped facilitate the act. Coincidentally, Cencich would be a student of Blakey just a few years later.

Cencich is now Director of the Institute of Criminological and Forensic Sciences and Dean of the School of Graduate Studies and Research at California University of Pennsylvania. The institute consults and trains law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and coroners in different methods of investigation and forensic science. It’s a crucial education, Cencich says. “You never want innocent people to go to jail. But you never want guilty people to go free, either.”