



Bill Piatt: Dean, St. Mary's University School of Law, San Antonio, TX

[By Charisse Dengler]

Not only is Bill Piatt the Dean of St. Mary's University School of Law, but he's also one of only two Hispanic deans in the country. Born and raised in Santa Fe, NM, Piatt speaks fluent Spanish and has taught at summer law programs in both Mexico and Spain. He thinks being multilingual is a major asset in today's legal field.

"I think it's really important, especially in the American Southwest and especially as our trading relationships continue to develop in Mexico and throughout Latin America and other Spanish-speaking countries," he said. "It offers an opportunity not only to enjoy the social benefits, but also to create solid business relationships. It gives a person who speaks the language of the person with whom they're doing business an opening that they otherwise might not have."

In addition to teaching in summer law programs, Piatt has spoken at seminars and lectured at universities in Mexico and Spain in both Spanish and English. Most of his books and research focus on the topic of language.

"I think we have to recognize a couple of things," he said. "First of all, to be successful in this country, you have to speak English; and you have to speak it very well. But that's not to say that we don't also have the capacity to learn and benefit from being able to communicate in more languages other than just English."

"In fact, I think it's a failing of our educational system that students graduate from college and really don't have multilingual capabilities. If it was totally up to me, I would really encourage mandating foreign languages and even foreign language proficiency before we award someone a bachelor's degree."

Piatt has been an attorney since 1975 and has spent time practicing and teaching. He said there are major differences between

practicing law and teaching law, and he enjoys the different relationships with judges and students that teaching affords.

"Primarily, the role here [at St. Mary's] is educational," he said. "I spend a lot of time working with students who are hoping to become attorneys, helping them in their choices as to the courses they're going to take and trying to help them identify what they want to do when they get out. I spend a lot of time working with the bench and the bar; and I really enjoy that relationship because when I can sit and talk with judges, I don't have to worry—and they don't have to worry—that I have a client on whose behalf I'm advocating. They know that my one client—if I have one—is the law school and its students. So, I enjoy the opportunity to talk with judges in a way that I could not when I was practicing law."

For the past 18 years, Piatt has been teaching in Texas, first at Texas Tech University in Lubbock and currently at St. Mary's University in San Antonio. As Dean of St. Mary's, he is responsible for overseeing the operation of the law school; and when he's not completely swamped, he also teaches constitutional law.

"I basically have the responsibility of making sure we continue to recruit good students, work with the faculty in helping to educate our students to prepare them for a legal career, [and] maintain the alumni contacts and the relations with the bench and the bar that will enable our students to develop the contacts that will translate into jobs when they graduate," he said.

As an educator in the legal field, Piatt thinks one of the main issues facing the legal education community today has to do with the way that the public views lawyers.

"I think that we're going to have to improve the image of lawyers," he said. "It's not always the fault of the legal profession that people think less of us. We, after all, have to stand up and assist people in very stressful situations. But I think we have to make sure that the people we let in are, number one, intellectually the best and the brightest; and then, to the extent that we can, we have to make sure that morally they're the best and the brightest."

"I really, strongly believe in the role of law schools and the bar in making sure that attorneys are not only legally competent, but [also] morally competent to practice law."

Piatt also thinks students interested in law should think long and hard about their motivation to become lawyers. He advises them to fully consider the fact that much of the work that lawyers do is in service to their clients.

"If money is the main or the only goal, they probably should consider a career other than law because for the amount of time and effort and work they're going to put into it—especially the first five or six years after law school—they probably could make more money doing something else," he said.

"I try to help them understand what area they think they can be of service [in] and try to find out whether they would be happy being of



service in that role. Because if they are happy in a service role, they're going to be able to make a decent living; but if they're not happy, they're going to end up being unsuccessful in their practice. They're going to end up spending a lot of time and money that they could do better things with at this point."

Piatt, whose wife also teaches at St. Mary's, said most of his time is wrapped up in the school. However, whenever he takes a break, he enjoys spending time with his children, playing with his new grandson, and running, a hobby he started in law school.

"I've been running since my second year in law school, when I realized it would help reduce stress for the bar exam; and I've been able to keep up with it," he said. "Now, I really like it that I've moved into a good age group. I'm in the 55-to-59 age group; and I've found that a lot of my competition isn't running anymore, so I'm a lot more successful. In fact, I'm looking forward to getting into the next age group, the 60-to-65 age group."

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St. Mary's University School of Law
www.stmarytx.edu/law/

Texas Tech University School of Law
www.law.ttu.edu/

Health Benefits of Running
running.about.com/od/gettingstarted/a/101whyrun_2.htm