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## Dean West: I Found My Home at Michigan Law

*Mark D. West began his tenure as the 17<sup>th</sup> dean of the University of Michigan Law School on September 1. He sat down with the Law Quadrangle to talk about his background, the School's long history of greatness, and the future of legal education.*

**Q What was your first encounter with Michigan Law? Did you know immediately it was the right place for you?**

**A** My first in-person encounter was in 1997 in Washington, D.C., at a faculty recruitment conference. The conference is structured a lot like the on-campus interviews that employers conduct with our students; schools send hiring committees, and candidates visit their interview rooms. The nature of the interview depends a lot on the expertise of the members of the hiring committee. My primary areas of expertise were corporate law and comparative law—Japanese law. This made some of my interviews unusual; I remember being asked questions about sushi and Chinese history.

Visiting the Michigan room was a very different experience. The committee was stellar—they were truly brilliant faculty members who had an amazing range of expertise. They had read my work, and they were able to ask questions that cut right to the core. I had worked with great lawyers who could do something similar, lawyers who could take pages and pages of documents and reduce them to a perfect question on which the entire matter was hinged. Now I was among professors who were doing the same, and they were doing it as a matter of casual conversation. It wasn't question-and-answer; it was an exchange among all of us—though, of course, I was the interviewee. They were critical and demanding, but it was a lot of fun, a very different atmosphere from other interviews. We laughed a lot. I knew then that this was the place I wanted to be even though I had never been to campus.

**Q Did you always plan to be a professor?**

**A** I wasn't completely convinced that I wanted to be a lawyer when I went to law school. I didn't know any lawyers, but I knew that I was interested in studying law, and I thought I would figure things out along the way.

I had a teaching career in the back of my mind. I thought I might teach Anglo-American law in a Japanese university after graduating. At the time, I didn't know what it meant to teach in a U.S. law school. But I soon learned that I liked law school, and I thought a teaching career could be fulfilling. In order to teach the courses I was interested in, I thought I needed to practice as an attorney first. After clerking, I went to a large firm, where I did corporate work but occasionally dipped into the litigation side because of my experience in Japan. I enjoyed working with clients. I enjoyed the work, particularly the search for creative solutions to structural problems. I still remember a night I spent drafting exit rights provisions for a three-party joint venture, and I'm grateful that my mentors at the firm allowed me to take the lead on projects like that.

**Q So what ultimately led you to make the career change?**

**A** I had questions that I wanted to research—questions that I had in law school that had now been shaped and honed by my experience as an attorney. At a basic level, those questions were about comparative corporate governance, but they really were part of a set of broader questions about how people—in Japan, the U.S., and elsewhere—structure their interactions, how they respond to law, and the role of law in society. At that point my career path was absolutely clear.

When I came to Michigan, I really wanted to wrestle with those questions, so I was most excited about research and writing. But when I got into the classroom, I loved it; the students here are the best of the best, and they welcomed the same kind of interchange I had with the faculty members. I expect the best of my students, and I want them to wrestle hard with thorny issues, but I also want us to have fun in the classroom.

**Q How important is it for you, as a professor, to get to know students outside of the classroom? Will you have the same kinds of interactions as dean?**

**A** I think it's important for students to have personal connections with faculty. I've taught our students for 15 years, and I'd like to think I've gotten better over time at making those connections. My lunch hour is usually packed, and so are the usual lunch spots; I prefer to get together a group of students at the end of the day [as in the photo below]. I've especially enjoyed getting together with 1Ls in my criminal law class who are just beginning their three years here.

As dean, I'll make sure to find ways of meeting with students. I believe that the connections faculty and administrators make with students shouldn't just take place inside the classroom, though I do hope to spend some time in the classroom even as dean. Those connections take place all over campus, all over the city, all around the world. One thing I look especially forward to as dean is reconnecting with former students.

**Q What is your take on the current public scrutiny of legal education?**

**A** People have asked me, "Why would you want to be a dean now?" There are some schools at which that might be a difficult question to answer. But this is Michigan. I realize when I say those words that, to some people, it might sound as if I'm just repeating a slogan. But really, this is *Michigan*. I know people who get chills from those words; I'm one of them.

I fully understand that challenges await any law school dean, but Michigan is a world-class institution like no other, and we are well-positioned to face changes in the legal profession. We have an enthusiastic and loyal alumni base—more than 20,000 people who share a lifelong connection to the Law School. And our expertise along so many dimensions of legal education positions students for a wide variety of careers across a wide geographic range.

**Q How do you think the Law School might change over the course of your term as dean?**

**A** We face new challenges, and of course we will be both proactive in anticipating change and flexible as we respond. I have established a strategic planning committee to help us plan for the future while remaining true to our mission.

But I don't anticipate fundamental changes in who we are. We are a world-class institution with longstanding traditions and a global reputation for excellence. I will build on the foundation that the previous deans, in particular Dean Caminker, created.

Something that certainly will not change is this: Students do not come to Michigan simply to get a degree, or even to get a first-rate legal education. Students come to Michigan to enter into a lifelong relationship with everything that makes this place special—the students, the faculty, the staff, the buildings, the city—all the things that have led me to call this place home.

