



Winter 2-10-2009

Making A Case for Science: Two Alumni Turn Science Degrees into Law Careers

Rachel Hatch
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news>

Recommended Citation

Hatch, Rachel, "Making A Case for Science: Two Alumni Turn Science Degrees into Law Careers" (2009). *News and Events*. 5547.

<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/5547>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

February 10, 2009

Contact: Rachel Hatch, (309) 556-3960

Making A Case for Science: Two Alumni Turn Science Degrees into Law Careers

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – At first glance, the poster-sized picture in Dan Hefner’s office in the law firm of Leydig, Voit & Mayer in downtown Chicago appears to be abstract art – a thin circle lined with a rainbow of colors and surrounded by hues of purple and blue. The picture, in fact, is anything but abstract. It is concrete proof of Hefner’s passion for science that has carried into his work today.

“It’s a photograph of a fertilized sea urchin egg that I took through a microscope my last day in the lab where I conducted undergraduate research,” said Hefner, a 1990 Illinois Wesleyan graduate who majored in biology. “Do you see the small lines in the cell? In about 10 minutes, it will begin to divide. This is truly its last minutes as a fertilized egg before it begins to become something completely different.”

Hefner understands the need to evolve. He came to Illinois Wesleyan with plans to attend medical school and major in chemistry or biology. By his junior year, however, Hefner noted changes in the medical field with the growth of managed care. “It seemed as though doctors were doing more paperwork and spending less time with patients,” he said. “I didn’t know where this trend would lead, and I didn’t want to get into a profession undergoing such unpredictable transformation. Besides, I didn’t think I would really be happy seeing patients.” Hefner made the transition from Illinois Wesleyan science major to lawyer.

It was much the same for Christopher Raistrick, a 1993 chemistry graduate from Illinois Wesleyan. “My goal was to go into astrochemistry,” said Raistrick from his LaSalle Street office at Adler, Murphy and McQuillen, only blocks away from Hefner’s law office. “I was always interested in space and science. Science articles are always the first ones I read online during my lunch breaks,” he said, nodding toward the computer on his desk.

Raistrick loved his chemistry classes at Illinois Wesleyan, with a special interest in Professor of Chemistry Forrest Frank’s research, in which Raistrick participated his senior year.

“The fingerprint technology was really intriguing,” he said. Yet nearing the end of his Illinois Wesleyan days, Raistrick began to question his path. “I still loved forensic chemistry, but I just could not see myself working in a lab eight hours a day.”

It was outside the lab that Raistrick found his calling to law. Taking a sociology class to fill his humanities credits, he volunteered for an area food pantry called Clare House. “I spent most of my Saturdays there, even after the class ended. It was an eye-opening experience that made me start to think seriously about what changes I could make,” he said. Speaking with his advisor, Raistrick took to her suggestion of law school. “It fit well with my growing interest in public policy, and would still fit if I decided to pursue forensic chemistry,” he said. After graduation, Raistrick applied to Loyola University Chicago School of Law, where he graduated in 1996.

Hefner found his way to law after reading about biotechnology patent lawyers in one of his father’s law journals. “My father then introduced me to a colleague in Chicago who practiced in the area of biotech and medical law,” said Hefner. “I was drawn right away to connections between law and science.” He decided to attend graduate school at Yale University to learn more about the emerging fields of genetic engineering and other cutting-edge biotechnologies.

Watching colleagues struggle to secure rare tenure-track positions and cycle through a series of post-doctoral fellowships convinced Hefner to pursue a different path. He graduated from Yale with a master’s degree in biology and then headed back to the Midwest to the University of Illinois, ultimately joining Leydig, Voit & Mayer in 1996 after earning his law degree.

Both Hefner and Raistrick discovered their science background worked well in their chosen profession. “I find at times I am a translator, interpreting and analyzing reports,” said Raistrick. During his time working for the Chicago Legal Clinic in the early 1990s, Raistrick worked on a zoning project to determine whether a proposed waste facility would negatively impact a neighborhood. “There were environmental reports and analysis throughout that case,” he said. Now with Adler, Murphy and McQuillen, he focuses on aviation law and insurance coverage law. “In many cases, we have expert testimony that is made by scientists. I have a background that helps me interpret their testimony to other lawyers, judges or juries,” he said, adding, “I imagine I ‘speak’ science.”

Hefner agrees, talking from his office that includes a mahogany bookshelf filled with scientific reference books with titles such as *The Handbook of Chemistry and Physics* and *The Merck Index*. “I couldn’t do my job without my science,” said Hefner, who has worked as a patent attorney. “I’ve worked with researchers who developed a way to obtain stem cells from liposuction. I understand what these scientists are saying and doing with stem cells, and I need to, so that I can help them patent their work.”

The lessons learned at Illinois Wesleyan remain. Though Raistrick has moved on from the Chicago Legal Clinic, he tries to maintain ties with the group that assists those who cannot afford legal representation, volunteering and taking part in fundraising efforts. “It’s the ideas I discovered at Illinois Wesleyan that keep me involved,” he said.

-30-