



**ELON**  
**LAW**

## A Family Legacy

THE HON. SARAH NEELY LANIER L'10  
NOW PRESIDES FROM THE SAME BENCH  
HER FATHER ONCE OCCUPIED.

*Alumni News*

WINTER 2019

# Bulletin

# MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN



**F**or those keeping score at home, this June marks my fifth anniversary as dean of Elon Law. Five years! It's hard to believe how fast time goes but, sure enough, it's been quite an adventure made possible by loyal students, faculty, staff and alumni.

- We've redesigned our curriculum for students to complete their legal studies in 2.5 years.
- We've achieved a 70 percent increase in applications in large measure because of our new innovative curriculum focused on experiential learning.
- We've reduced by 20 percent the amount of debt our students accrue in loans.
- We've expanded the Office of Career and Student Development to support students in their studies and graduates in their careers.
- We've grown the Office of Academic Success to better serve our students and graduates as they prepare for the bar exam.
- And we've been recognized for the second time in 10 years as one of the most innovative law schools.

As I begin the next five years of service as dean, we are turning our attention to the future. Elon University is developing a new strategic plan, and I am co-chairing a subcommittee tasked with identifying potential partners in Greensboro to expand the university's academic programs and community resources.

Strategic planning is encoded in Elon University's institutional DNA. It is part of the university's success in achieving a national reputation over the past 40 years and, in fact, is what led to the creation of Elon Law when the NewCentury@Elon strategic plan was created at the turn of the century. The plan called for "a law school with a difference." And here we are, on the cusp of Elon Law's next decade of innovation and education, with a reaccreditation visit by the American Bar Association planned in 2020-21.

The changing demographics of our nation, the changing way students learn, and the changing nature of the legal profession will influence what we do in the years ahead. But I know that we are poised for great success because we already see the fruits of our early efforts, as you'll read in the pages ahead. So let's celebrate our achievements and look forward to the next chapter of Elon Law's incredible story as together we help shape the future of legal education.

***Luke Bierman***

*Dean and Professor of Law*

# 'He really deserved this win'

Pro tip: Be honest about any lead in your house paint. Otherwise, it might cost you.

In her first jury trial representing a plaintiff, Megan Boorsma L'16 helped secure a \$1.85 million verdict on behalf of a Connecticut man suffering the effects of lead poisoning from seven months of renovation work without wearing protective equipment in a historic house.

"Our client cried and hugged us after they read the verdict," Boorsma said following the November trial. "I haven't been practicing that long but it was one of the best feelings I've experienced so far in my career. He really deserved this win."

Richard Vichas is a U.S. Army veteran who works as a professional painter. Five years ago, he was assigned a job at a house that, coincidentally, was owned by another professional painter. Both the owner and Vichas' employer repeatedly told him the house was free of lead paint. That wasn't true.

Vichas, 54, has since been plagued with memory woes and cognitive impairments. He lost his home for a while and lived in a shelter because of his health. And the jury, perhaps persuaded by old text messages

introduced at trial, determined that compensation was in order.

A former Elon Law professor wasn't surprised with Boorsma's success. "Megan was a great student in my Torts course," said Associate Dean Enrique Armijo, "and I am not surprised she used her talent and skills to win an important award for her client."

Boorsma served on the Elon Law Review and the Moot Court Board while a law student. She had only recently moved to Connecticut and took the job at the Mills Law Firm in New Haven when she was assigned the case. Until then she had spent most of her time working with insurance companies handling accident claims.

"I really believed him. I could see through his demeanor, which can be off putting because he's loud and gets heated, but I believed him," Boorsma said. "And that's the thing. That's what he needed. For people to listen."

Score one for the little guy. And the little law firm that took the case to a jury. The last offer to settle before the trial? \$17,500.



*Left to right: Attorney John Mills, client Richard Vichas, and attorney Megan Boorsma L'16*



## THE GOOD STUFF

Share uplifting stories from the courtroom by emailing [etownsend4@elon.edu](mailto:etownsend4@elon.edu) for consideration in future News Bulletins.

# NEWS



## A VISIT BY THE FOURTH CIRCUIT



Elon Law marked an institutional milestone when, for the first time since the school opened in 2006, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit heard oral arguments inside the Robert E. Long Courtroom.

The judges who heard both cases - the **Hon. Roger L. Gregory**, the **Hon. Diana Gribbon Motz**, and the **Hon. Albert Diaz** – used their visit on Oct. 10, 2018, as an opportunity to share with Elon Law students their reflections on the judiciary and the service attorneys provide in faithfully representing clients.



# NOTES

## LEGAL LEGEND HONORED WITH TOP ELON LAW PROFESSIONAL AWARD



**T**he Hon. Henry E. Frye, the first African American to serve as chief justice of the Supreme Court of North Carolina and the first African American elected to the state legislature in the 20th century, accepted Elon Law's 2018 Leadership in the Law Award during an October banquet hosted by North Carolina Lawyers Weekly in partnership with Elon Law.

Frye has long supported Elon Law, where he serves as a founding member of the law school's Board of Advisors. He is one of three former North Carolina chief justices whose name is affixed to Elon Law's annual Billings, Exum & Frye National Moot Court Competition.



## Elon Law scholar reelected to UNIDROIT

**Professor Henry Gabriel** has been reelected to a five-year term on the Governing Council of the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law.

Founded in 1926, UNIDROIT is an intergovernmental organization based in Rome with 63 member countries, including the United States. UNIDROIT studies needs and methods for modernizing, harmonizing and coordinating private and, in particular, commercial law as between states and groups of states, and to formulate uniform law instruments, principles and rules to achieve those objectives.

Nominated by the United States government, this is Gabriel's fourth term on the Council.



## Praise from The Princeton Review

For the fourth consecutive year, Elon Law made the **"The Best 165 Law Schools,"** a guide published by The Princeton Review based on an 80-question survey where 17,700 students rated their schools on several topics and report on experiences at their schools.

Students noted the school's "friendly atmosphere" and smaller size ensuring that "everyone knows your name." One shared with The Princeton Review how the staff makes it clear they "want you to succeed."

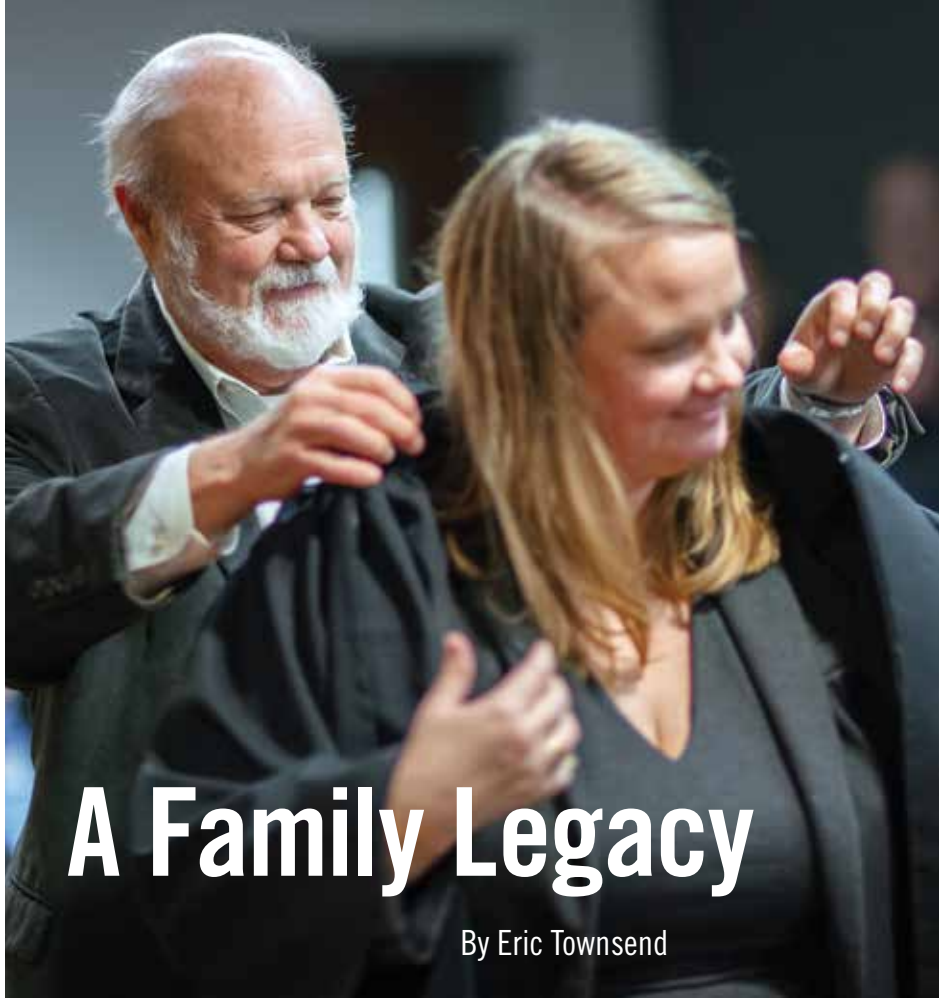


## Healthy habits for the bar and beyond

A leading Duke University medical researcher visited Elon Law in January to share lifestyle advice with students and recent graduates studying for the bar exam.

Aim for 10,000 steps every day, fast for at least 10 hours each day, maintain a daily routine, and put down the phones long before bed. Get a good night's sleep two nights before the exam, said **Dr. William Kraus**. Bar takers will likely be anxious the night before the exam and rest will be tougher to find.

Kraus' visit was sponsored by the Office of Academic Success.



# A Family Legacy

By Eric Townsend

**I**t wasn't until she was in high school that the Hon. Sarah Neely Lanier L'10 realized how much work her dad handled as a North Carolina District Court judge. All it took was a new phone.

After she and her father spent the better part of a day running phone lines upstairs in the family's Randolph County 1920's farmhouse, where the then-teenager could chat with friends from the privacy of her bedroom, sleep proved tough to find.

The phone rang three times that night. In each instance, a social service worker on the other end of the line sought permission from the Hon. William "Bill" Neely to remove a child from a dangerous home environment. "I didn't realize how much the phone rang in our home until I got one in my room," Lanier recalls. "(My dad) couldn't talk about work ... there are a lot of things to it that people don't recognize."

It's now Lanier's turn to help lead her community as a North Carolina District Court judge on the same bench her father once occupied. Lanier, the second Elon Law alum elected judge in the school's young history, took her ceremonial oath of office in early January before dozens of family, friends, and legal professionals packed inside the Randolph County Courthouse.

Lanier won a three-way race last fall with 61 percent of the vote.

"I'm very proud of my daughter and have all the confidence that she and her family will do a good job representing the county," says Bill Neely, who helped his daughter into her judicial robe as soon as she completed her oath. Neely served on the bench from 1980 through his retirement in 2008. "Sarah grew up in the country and I think she's gotten a good feel for what it's like to be a regular person here, and to understand the problems of those in the community."

District Court judges deal with a lot. Traffic tickets and divorces. Adoptions and misdemeanor charges. You can also handle first appearances in high-profile crimes. And there are many people affected by your decisions, even if they never step foot in the courthouse. Both Lanier and her father point to the need for humility in a jurist.

"He's taught me that you have to stay down to earth and use common sense, and really listen to every side," Lanier says. "Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Don't jump to conclusions and give people an opportunity to be heard."

Lanier had been thinking about running for judge for a few years but wanted to first spend time in private

*“He’s taught me that you have to stay down to earth and use common sense, and really listen to every side. Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Don’t jump to conclusions and give people an opportunity to be heard.”*



## What You May Not Know About Sarah Neely Lanier

- » **Family:** Husband, Jeremy; son, Alex. Jeremy Lanier is a captain for the Randolph County Sheriff’s Office and oversees courthouse security
- » **Alma Mater:** College of Charleston, from which her father also graduated
- » **Pastimes:** Enjoys the beach and her father’s sailboat, and exploring small North Carolina towns
- » **Civic Service:** Involved with the Randolph Livestock & Poultry Improvement Association, volunteers with Partnership For Children



practice. Her particular passion is children. Even before law school, Lanier worked for three years in Asheboro with a restitution program for juvenile defendants. She later focused her Elon Law studies on family law.

Elon Law administrators who taught Lanier recalled her passion for serving the law school on the Moot Court Board and in the bond she shares with her father. “I was not surprised at all that she would want to follow in his footsteps,” said Senior Associate Dean Alan Woodlief. “I am proud to have Sarah as a member of the North Carolina judiciary and know her intellect, judgment and commitment to service will make her an exceptional jurist.”

Times have changed since Bill Neely sat on the bench. The judicial district, once as large as four North Carolina counties, is now exclusively Randolph County. Even so, the caseload also has expanded. The county has introduced new strategies to make the courts more efficient for those who find themselves caught up in the legal system.

Lanier sees additional opportunities

to improve courthouse efficiency by building off of programs like Randolph County’s Family Court. Also in the works is her ABA-recognized Child Welfare Law Specialist certification through the National Association of Counsel for Children.

She’ll balance her judicial work with the demands of motherhood. Lanier started to measure support for a possible candidacy shortly before learning she was pregnant with her first child. She and her husband welcomed their son in a hospital room where the mom-to-be was placing orders for campaign signs during labor. “Some of the nurses figured out what I was doing and started teasing me,” Lanier says. “But you have to multitask!”

The addition of a new family member brings full circle a story of family legacies. With her husband holding the Bible in one hand and their son in another, Lanier took her ceremonial oath of office on January 2, 2019, in the William Marcus Neely Courtroom.

A courtroom named in honor of the same man who installed phone lines in a teenage Sarah’s bedroom. ■

## LAW SCHOOL UPDATE



## Celebrating the Class of 2018

Only one profession requires its members to swear to defend the Constitution of the United States: Attorneys, who are officers of the court, “whose duty it is to seek justice and to protect the rule of law.”

“You will have a special duty to stand up when the Constitution – and the democratic norms and institutions that give it meaning – are undermined or threatened,” said North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein in a Commencement address to Elon Law’s Class of 2018. “Fortunately, Elon Law has prepared you to be a lawyer-leader since your first day.”

The completed preparation to serve as lawyer-leaders served as the theme of a Dec. 15 ceremony where 102 degrees were conferred on the 11th class to graduate from Elon Law, and only the second to complete its new 2.5-year, highly experiential curriculum. More than 1,000 guests filled Alumni Gym for the late-morning program.

In closing the ceremony, Elon President Connie Book, presiding over her first Elon Law Commencement, charged graduates with living lives that adhere to the Elon University Honor Code of honesty, integrity, responsibility and respect.

“You now stand among the most well-educated people on the planet,” she said. “I’m confident that you will harness your newly acquired knowledge and leadership in the pursuit of justice for all people.”



## Individual honors for the Class of 2018



### David Gergen Award for Leadership & Professionalism Timaura Barfield

Selected by a faculty and staff committee based on law school activities that represent the twin principles of leadership and professionalism, Barfield co-chaired Elon Law's national moot court competition, served as an Honor Council defender, assisted classmates as an Academic Teaching Fellow, and helped guide the Black Law Students Association as vice president.

### Elon Law's Distinguished Service Award Grace Lay

### North Carolina Advocates for Justice Award Jeffrey Porter Jr.

### International Academy of Trial Lawyers Award Jordan Hensley

### North Carolina Chapter AAML Award Ashley Henson

### ALI-CLE Award Olivia Matte

### Elon Law's Michael L. Rich Memorial Award for Excellence in Criminal Law Studies Jesse Peterson

### National Association of Women Lawyers Outstanding Law Student Award Lauren Franklin

### North Carolina Student Pro Bono Award Alishia Tidwell

### CLEA Outstanding Student Award Olivia Lambert-Tucker

## Kente ceremony brims with laughter and tears



Elon Law's Donning of the Kente Ceremony in December brought together 19 graduates, their friends and family, and law school faculty and staff for a program the night before Commencement featuring keynote remarks inspired by former First Lady Michelle Obama's bestselling book "Becoming."

More than anything, said speaker Tiffany Atkins '11, African-American graduates should remind themselves as often as necessary that their feelings of doubt and uncertainty "can demoralize you and rock you to your core, if you allow them to." Instead, she said, remember the courage and fortitude they have already demonstrated throughout their lives in overcoming past obstacles. Tell yourself every day that "I can do this."

"I am here because I earned it. Because I am gifted. Because I was made for this," said Atkins, a visiting assistant professor at Wake Forest University School of Law and a former Legal Method and Communication Fellow at Elon Law.

"We are our ancestors' wildest dreams. In the belly of a ship. On a plantation. On the wrong end of a hose. We are who they fought for. And we all have to walk with that awareness and knowledge that we were made for this."

# CLASS



Jen Hoverstad L'11



Manisha Patel L'11

## 2009

**A.T. Debnam L'09**, an attorney at the Mueller Law Firm in Raleigh, was selected as a 2019 Super Lawyers Rising Star, her third year on the list. Debnam also is now licensed to practice law in Texas.

**Barron Thompson L'09** was sworn in in December as a North Carolina Civil District Court Arbitrator.

## 2010

**Justin Ervin L'10** has become a partner at the Greensboro firm of Johnson, Peddrick & McDonald, PLLC, where he has worked since 2011 after completing his LLM in taxation at the University of Florida.

## 2011

**Keith Helsabeck L'11** recently passed the Fundamentals of Engineering licensing exam, which qualified him to sit for the USPTO Patent Exam. He received his license to practice patent law in late December and will start working in intellectual property law.

**Jen Hoverstad L'11** in December joined full-time the Forrest Firm, a Raleigh firm for which she had previously served of counsel. Hoverstad has spent the greater part of the year in treatment for Stage 3 breast cancer and learned in August that she had a complete response to chemotherapy. She has blogged about her experience with cancer at [jenhoverstad.com](http://jenhoverstad.com).

**Manisha Patel L'11** opened her own practice, the Law Office of Manisha P. Patel, PLLC, in November 2018 and was also honored by the Triad Business Journal as one of its Top 40 Leaders Under 40. Patel likewise was recognized by Business NC Legal Elite for 2019 in Family Law and is serving as president of the North Carolina Association of Women Attorneys for 2019.

## 2012

**Matthew Kraus L'12** was hired in September 2018 as an assistant attorney general in the Public Assistance Section of the N.C. Department of Justice.

# NOTES



Andrew Poltorak L'12



Colleen (Forcina) Molner L'13

**Andrew Poltorak L'12**, an attorney with Stites & Harbison, PLLC, has been invited to participate in C-Change, a leadership development program of the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber. During the year-long program, the 55-member class will enhance leadership skills and lead community projects that will have a positive impact on the Cincinnati region.

**Kathy Stewart L'12** has joined the law firm of Drew, Eckl & Farnham in Atlanta.

## 2013

**Colleen (Forcina) Molner L'13** has been promoted to partner at Garfinkel Immigration Law Firm in Charlotte and was only one of five immigration lawyers in the state to become a North Carolina State Bar Board Certified Immigration Law Specialist in 2018. She also graduated last year from

the Mecklenburg County Bar Leadership Institute.

**Mike Wilson L'13** and his wife, Jennifer, welcomed a son, Grant Patrick Wilson, on September 22, 2018. Grant joins big brother Michael.



Mike Wilson L'13



Matt Millisor L'16, Britney Boles Millisor L'Dec.17 and Elon Law friends

## 2016

**Matt Millisor L'16** and **Britney Boles L'Dec.17** were married on July 28, 2018. They were joined by several Elon Law friends. Matt is an associate with Pinto Coates Kyre & Bowers, PLLC in Greensboro, and Britney is an associate Black, Slaughter & Black, PA.

## Upcoming Events at Elon Law

**February 28:** Former U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch visits for the Distinguished Leadership Lecture Series at 6:30 p.m.

**March 5:** Elon Day 2019. Join us in supporting Elon Law scholarships and programming on the university's 5<sup>th</sup> annual day of giving.

# ELON DAY

**March 5:** The N.C. Court of Appeals makes its annual spring visit to Elon Law. Oral arguments begin at 2 p.m.

**March 15:** The Greensboro Bar Association holds a CLE event at Elon Law from 12-4:30 p.m. and speakers include the prosecutor in the Bill Cosby case. More information available from GBA.

**April 5:** Admitted Students Day

**May 17-18:** Elon Law Alumni Reunion Weekend. Details to come.

## Stay Connected!

We welcome your questions and ideas at [lawalumni@elon.edu](mailto:lawalumni@elon.edu).

 **LinkedIn**

Go to LinkedIn, search for “**Elon Law Alumni**” and join the group! Also follow us on Elon Law’s official LinkedIn page.

 **Twitter**

Elon Law Alumni: [@ElonLawAlumni](https://twitter.com/ElonLawAlumni)  
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 **Facebook**

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The law school’s Facebook page:  
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# ELON LAW

## Alumni Association

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Greensboro, NC 27401

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