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Czeching in at John Marshall

Class connects students with peers in Czech Republic for studies on public health law

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In a classroom on the 12th floor of The John Marshall Law School this week, six classmates and professor Judith W. Munson watched a student give his final presentation. Five students sat at a table. The sixth was on the projector screen.

That's because he was at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic. Every Wednesday at noon Chicago time and 7 p.m. Czech time, Munson signed into Skype and welcomed student Václav Vich to her class, Public Health Emergency Law: Domestic and International.

"That's why he's my hero," Munson said about Vich, whose participation in the class allowed it to maintain its international flavor.

The class — which Munson has taught at John Marshall since 2007 — examines the legal structures responsible for handling natural and man-made disasters such as disease outbreaks or bioterrorism. In it, students learn the impact of the two events that, Munson said, "changed the world in public health" — the anthrax attacks in 2001 and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2002 and 2003.

"It's an incredible story, those two things one upon the other that transformed public health law," Munson said. "It's my mission to bring that message into the purview to law students."

Education innovations

The seeds of the class can be found in a bar in Prague.

In 1994, when one of Munson's sons moved to the Czech Republic capital and opened a bar, Munson and her husband Lester — a fellow

attorney, journalist and sports law authority best known for local and national TV appearances — decided to search for opportunities to go to visit their son.

The Munsons found one in the late 1990s when they began noticing news briefs in the Daily Law Bulletin about John Marshall professor Michael P. Seng, who was leading delegations of American lawyers to the Czech Republic each year. Intrigued, they asked him out to lunch to learn more about the trips and ask if they could join.

"We knew the two of us could make presentations," Judith Munson said. "We were interested in going to the Czech Republic, and it was probably going to be a good thing to be able to say something to our son other than 'OK, now what are we going to do today?'"

In the early 2000s, around the time that the world of public health law was undergoing a shift, the Munsons made their first trip to the Czech Republic.

Judith Munson's speech centered on the Tuskegee Experiment, a study the U.S. government conducted between 1932 and 1972, in which poor blacks with syphilis were told they were getting free government health care when, in fact, their disease was simply being observed.

The man who exposed the experiment was a Czech immigrant working at a venereal disease clinic in San Francisco.

"This is the connection," Munson thought to herself when she learned about the Czech man. "This is the connection between what I want to talk about and why they would listen."

Munson and her husband continued to travel with Seng's delegation until 2007, when Dean John E. Corkery asked her to start a



Judith W. Munson

class on public health emergency law.

Because of her connections in the Czech Republic, she began teaching the class at Masaryk University in Brno during John Marshall's spring break and then connecting students over Skype like pen pals.

"They had this international element that was a real element," Munson said. "It was real. They were internationalized during the course of the semester. It works incredibly well if you have something like that, that you're able to offer."

An unlikely way to bond

An international connection is not all Munson's class can offer.

Each student selects two public health topics during the semester-long class — one rooted in geography, the other in a type of public health event.

One student, for instance, studied nuclear, chemical and radiological threats — and the country of Turkey. Another studied natural and man-made disasters — and Israel and Palestine.

Student Joe Holt, a Chicago police officer, studied the impact of the 2012 NATO Summit on Chicago, along with public health initiatives in the Americas.

"(The class) opened my eyes to an area of the law I had never thought about exploring ... like how epidemics like SARS (or) H1N1 ... work their way into legislation," Holt said.

During each class, students give 10-minute presentations on their findings. That means students get the opportunity to teach as well as

learn and to learn about snippets of everybody else's topics along with their own.

Those presentations comprise the first half of each class period. During the second half, Munson teaches students about the legal impact of the aforementioned public health events.

"There are some students who are constantly on CNN.com. I'm not one of those kids," said student Kevin Hom. "I'm in my own little law school bubble, so it was great to be exposed to (these topics). Otherwise I'm just in my law school book learning about contracts and torts and stuff like that."

As for Vich, he tried to take Munson's class at Masaryk but could not because there was not enough space in the computer lab. Munson asked if any students would be willing to take the class on Skype with the John Marshall students. Vich agreed.

That allowed the class to maintain an international component, because a drop in numbers in the John Marshall class meant that Munson could not link students like pen pals the way she likes.

It also made Munson's class the first at John Marshall to incorporate a foreign student via Skype — giving new meaning to "distance learning."

When this week's final class ended, Munson looked up at the screen to Vich.

"Václav, we applaud you for taking a chance on us," she said.

"Thank you so much guys," he said. "It was a great experience for me. Thank you so much."

The students waved to Vich, who waved back. It was the end of a new friendship, one that began at the start of the semester during class introductions when one student mentioned that he was from Milwaukee.

"One second!" Vich shouted and ran away from the screen into another room as the students sat in Chicago waiting. He returned with a T-shirt that a friend had given him after a trip to America, a shirt with an outline of the state of Wisconsin and text that read "Drink Wisconsibly."

That brought the house down.

"That T-shirt," Munson said later, still laughing at the happy coincidence. "Who would ever predict that a T-shirt would be the bonding agent?"

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