

Q & A with Peter Lederer - Vanguard and Co-Founder of LawWithoutWalls

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Miami Law spoke with Peter Lederer, an Adjunct Professor of Law at the University of Miami School of Law who serves on the Law School's Visiting Committees. He is one of LWOW's founding members, and the Chairman of its Advisory Committee. Over the last seven decades he has practiced international law, and brooded over the future of legal education.

As one of the founders of LWOW, what was the impetus of developing this program?



Peter Lederer

The impact of globalization on the legal profession served as the impetus – though somewhat indirectly. In late 2009, after Trish White took the Deanship, we were discussing plans for work I might undertake during my upcoming winter visit to the law school. I suggested that organizing a symposium on this topic might be timely. She thought it a useful idea, and encouraged me to talk this over with Michele DeStefano, then also newly arrived at Miami and very much interested in this field.

Michele and I got together, and quickly agreed on three things: the world did not need another symposium, we wanted something centered on students, and we wanted it to draw on students from around the world. We did not, however, yet know what the “it” might be. For some weeks, in early 2010, Michele and I kicked around ideas. We talked to everyone at the law school and elsewhere who had a program involving students from outside the United States, with a view to seeing what “best practices” might be. We pored over the (sparse) literature. We struggled to figure out what might work.

And then Michele had a leap of inspiration: creating “it” as a part-virtual program, with students to come from a handful of law schools we thought to be particularly likely to be excited by the concept. Many months of intense work followed, but by January 2011 it was reality and LWOW held its first Kickoff at University College London.

How has LWOW changed over the five years since you helped launch?

It's gone from toddler to teenager! It has grown in every metric: the number of outstanding schools participating – from five to thirty; the skills and sophistication of the students; the highly polished skills Michele and her two colleagues, Erika Concetta Pagano and Lauren Madigan, bring to running the program, student and mentor selection, thought leader recruitment and topic selection; ever more reliable (though not perfect!) technology; new product such as LWOW X, the all-virtual version...the list goes on and on. The intense work that has gone into ongoing development has made LWOW familiar as a metaphor for innovation.

What has been the impact of LWOW?

It has been a significant impact, on multiple levels. From the students who have participated, one hears “LWOW has changed my life...” Or, as one student just wrote to me, “LWOW has been by far the best thing I've experienced in my legal education.” If you drill down, the details that emerge go to a larger world opening up, learning teamwork, coping with the pressures of working with colleagues from different cultures, legal systems and time zones...all while seeking to produce a project of worth. Of greatest value for many is finding the courage to create. Edgar Dong, now in his final year at Peking University School of Transnational Law, touchingly said to us that participating in LWOW last year inspired him to undertake his startup project right now! Result? His new company has 130 employees, and an app that is used by 30 million in China!

The dozens upon dozens of volunteer mentors to the student teams show what value they place upon LWOW by their remarkable willingness to give of themselves repeatedly and unstintingly. For some, that involves sacrificing sleep or weekend time. Despite this, young lawyers from LWOW sponsor Eversheds mourn that they cannot repeat the mentoring experience but must yield to the following year's cohort. At one of their multinational clients, some 300 of their lawyers competed for one open mentor place this year! The word is out that you learn skills at LWOW that are thrilling and valuable for the rest of your professional life.

A particularly rewarding result is that the academic mentors increasingly have carried LWOW's techniques and approaches to their own classrooms – whether in Miami itself, or in Leipzig or London or St. Gallen or Montreal. LWOW is aptly named a collaboratory: participate, and you will be exposed countless times in the space of a short semester to what works and what doesn't, new ways to understand others, and the dynamics of an extraordinary multicultural, multiple legal system, multi-language group.

How have your goals for the program shifted over time?

The basic goals remain constant: to meet the needs of the new global, complex multi-disciplinary legal marketplace. But these goals are explored with ever-increasing sophistication and knowledge. Geographical expansion, the inclusion of new schools -- from Chile, to Iceland, to South Africa, to Australia – continuously brings fresh insights in how to approach and solve issues. The addition of business schools and their students to the program, enabling the creation of “mixed” law and business student teams, has greatly enriched the program. It provides a living laboratory for demonstrating the effectiveness of inter-disciplinary teams.

Is there one project that stands out in your mind?

For me it is really impossible to choose a single one. Each year there will be two or three projects presented at the final Conposium that are exceptionally fresh or powerful. Sometimes that will be because of the emotional force and social need that inform a well thought out project: seeking redress for pollution of the Nigerian delta by oil drilling, or providing resources to those seeking to help women and children who have been trafficked. Others will stand out because of the sheer skill and imagination that has gone into seeking to fill a real need in the legal world: how to actually collect a small claims court judgment from a deadbeat creditor, or how to go about navigating the regulatory morass of wanting to start a new micro brewery.

What has been most impressive is that, virtually without exception, each team ultimately has managed to produce – no matter what the obstacles – a totally respectable work product. Indeed, often an outstanding one. And the deep satisfaction that comes with that, the realization that intense work as a team has produced an outcome they would not have thought themselves capable of, has been wonderful to watch.

What does the future hold for LWOW?

The future for LWOW holds great promise. Five years on, it is totally clear that the full legal needs of tomorrow’s societies cannot be met by the conventional “lawyer” of today. It is equally clear that many of those needs will not fall into neatly separated buckets labeled “law”, or “business” or “technology”. Innovation, entrepreneurial skill, collaboration, an embracing of diversity, comfort with new technologies...these are the attributes that will be looked for and highly valued in tomorrow’s legal workers. And these are the attributes LWOW teaches and fosters in its students.

LWOW is not cheap. Bringing students, academics, mentors, thought leaders, entrepreneurs and venture capitalists from around the world together physically for the Kickoff, and then again for the Conposium, is a massive investment in time and money.

To date it has been made possible by the incredibly generous donation of their time by countless participants, and the equally generous financial contributions of prior financial sponsors, principally the University of Miami School of Law and Eversheds. Effort needs to be made to ensure ongoing funding. The value in doing this is twofold: First, the uniquely valuable experience gained by all participants, experience which will enrich all future work they undertake. Second, the lessons learned – again by all who participate – which will serve to inform teaching, practice and entrepreneurial projects throughout the world. LWOW X, the all-virtual version, equally holds great potential for offering much of what the original program offers though at a significantly lower cost.