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Meet our new faculty: Valena Beety

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You've read about some of the amazing students we have starting with us next week. Now we'll introduce you to some of the new faculty who have joined us over the summer. First up is Valena Beety, the Robert H. McKinney Professor of Law. Prof. Beety was most recently Professor of Law and Deputy Director of the Academy for Justice at the Arizona State University Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law.

I’ll start with the obvious: Why IU, and why now?

VB: I grew up just outside of Indianapolis. My mom taught for Indianapolis Public Schools (at Arlington High School and Crispus Attucks High School), and my dad worked for AC Delco, as part of General Motors. I graduated from Brebeuf Jesuit High School, and went to college and law school in Chicago, before leaving the Midwest for job opportunities. I’m thankful to be able to move back to Indiana with my spouse and to be close to my family again. I have many friends who went to IU for school, and now friends who teach there – including some of my friends from high school! Bloomington is an amazing and welcoming community, and close to Indianapolis. I’m glad to be back and be a Hoosier! Though admittedly, my dad and my granddad both went to Purdue (my granddad went to school with Orville Redenbacher) and both went on to work for General Motors, in Kokomo and Anderson. So the southern part of the state is a bit new to me.
You were the founding director of the West Virginia Innocence Project and have a passion for working for those who have been wrongfully convicted. What inspired you to pursue that focus? Is there a particular story/memory of that type of work that stands out to you or you’re most proud of?

VB: I went to law school because I was a Rape Victim Advocate in college, where I helped survivors in the hospital as they sought treatment and also worked with doctors and police. I wanted to prosecute sexual violence and domestic violence to stop the offenders, and stop those cycles of violence. I got my dream job and became a federal prosecutor in Washington, D.C., prosecuting those cases. Only then did I learn that prison often does not end cycles of violence, and the criminal legal system often does not help or support survivors. A friend told me about a job opening at the Mississippi Innocence Project, so I applied and went down for an interview. The director of the project took me to meet one of their clients, Levon Brooks, who had recently been exoneredated and freed from prison – after being wrongly convicted for a crime of sexual violence. I met him at his mother’s funeral. She fought for him for all those years, and then once he was released, she died shortly after. I asked him if he was angry to lose her, and he said no, she could finally lay her hammer down. What grace. Meeting Levon started my path to advocate for people wrongly incarcerated, particularly in rural communities like Mississippi, West Virginia, and now Indiana.
One story I’m particularly proud of is the basis of my book, *Manifesting Justice: Wrongly Convicted Women Reclaim Their Rights*. My client Leigh and her co-defendant Tami were wrongly convicted in rural Mississippi of a crime that never occurred, because they are lesbians. A dentist dreamt up fantastical allegations of bite marks, and because of false stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people as violent, deviant, and predatory, Leigh and Tami were wrongly convicted – of a crime that never occurred. I was proud to represent them and a court granted their freedom and reversed their convictions. But I think this is a key warning story, when we see these same stereotypes arising again nationally and here in Indiana – that LGBTQ+ people are dangerous. Indy Reads, a book store in Indianapolis that hosts a Drag Story Hour has received bomb threats. I’ll be talking about *Manifesting Justice* there in June, and about how queer people are being criminalized and the targets of hate crimes and violence because of our identities.

Indiana Law has a solid history in criminal law teaching and research. From Jerome Hall to the recently retired Joe Hoffmann, we’ve had a number of influential people here in that area. From an outsider’s perspective, could you talk a bit about our reputation in criminal law and how you might see us growing there moving forward?

VB: IU has an incredible criminal law faculty! Joe Hoffman is a legend, particularly in post-conviction work, which is my area as well. I followed his work and expertise for years. IU further solidified its reputation when it hired Jessica Eaglin and later India Thusi, who are both superstars in the field. I am thrilled to be joining them as colleagues, they were a big part of my decision to join the faculty. They also told me how supportive the faculty is in general, even when giving feedback on scholarship from different points of view. (*Editor’s note: After this interview was conducted, Prof. Eaglin announced she had accepted a position at Cornell Law School.*)

Could you tell us about any research projects you’re working on now that you’re particularly excited about?

VB: One of my ongoing research projects is identifying little-known post-conviction claims, how they have been successfully litigated, and sharing those strategies and information with a broader non-academic audience of post-conviction litigators. The first part of this project was a Guide released this Spring, *Miscarriages of Justice: Litigating Beyond Factual Innocence*. I’m now working on Part II, with a working group of Conviction Integrity Unit prosecutors, academics, and post-conviction defense attorneys and innocence litigators. The focus is, perhaps not surprisingly, wrongful convictions of women.

Outside of academia, what are some of your favorite ways to spend your time?

My wife (Prof. Jenn Oliva) and I like to be outdoors – bicycling, hiking, kayaking. I also have a ukulele that I like to play and sing along; back in the day I was in the Indianapolis Children’s Choir, and it was a big part of my life. Everything comes full circle!