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Scholarship and Research Mark New IU Law Dean

John Fancher

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By JOHN FANCHER

IU Civic Affairs Editor
Sheldon Plager is a jogger, a sailor and new dean of the Indiana University Law School.

He is personable, meets people easily and expresses confidence in his firm beliefs in the importance of research and creative scholarship in his profession.

"We need to have a better understanding of the society and the law's role in that society," said Plager.

He noted domestic problems once were solved through tradition, custom and the influence of the church. "Now, these are given to the courts to solve," he said.

Plager believes the nation's law schools provide both the opportunity and the resources for doing some "hard thinking" about the law and society.

"The research and scholarship role supports the teaching role. It certainly is appropriate for some of that research and scholarly endeavor to be aimed at current problems in society," he said, adding:

"Good teaching stays good, stays relevant, stays fresh and stays focused when the teacher is involved in a careful understanding of his own field.

"The school has a responsibility not just to contribute to knowledge in the abstract, but also to contribute to the solutions for problems."

Lean and tan, Plager is a family man, and that's the major reason he is in Bloomington instead of pursuing a career with the U.S. Navy, which he started out to do. He said spending a lot of time at sea with a wife and baby on shore helped him make his decision long ago to switch to a life on land and lakes.

He never lost his nautical association, though, and he's called "commodore" at home because he's the proud owner of four boats, ranging from a canoe to a sailboat.

He and his wife, Frankie, are the parents of Daniel, 17, who will be a freshman at IU this fall; David, 20, who will be a junior at Stanford University, and Kathy, 24, a second-year graduate student at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Plager came to Bloomington July 1 from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, where he was a law professor.

He is a specialist in environmental law, and reports the IU Law School has two such specialists, although it is losing one of them - Nicholas White, who has accepted a position as dean of the Law School at Memphis, Tenn. The other specialist is Dan Tarlock, who is author of one of the leading case books in the field.

Law is a popular field with many young people, and Plager said the IU Law School had 1,200 applications for 200 seats this fall's entering class. Statistics show in three years, 117,451 lawyers will be graduated from the nation's American Bar Association-approved law schools.

"This will be about a 25 percent increase over today's 445,000 practicing lawyers," said Plager, but he is not concerned about the number of lawyers, because he views the legal system as a "problem-solving mechanism."

"Resolution of conflict is a major function," he said, but recognizes the legal machinery is not equipped to solve a lot of little problems.

The IU Law School has about 20 faculty members and tries to maintain an enrollment of between 500 and 600 students.

He said the school "was a clear and important obligation to the State of Indiana to support and aid its legal institutions."

The Bloomington school also is interested in working with the IU Law School in Indianapolis, and Plager already has talked with Dean William Harvey there.

A blue ribbon committee determined IU should have two law schools with different missions, and Plager feels each will have something to offer the other.

In addition to its obligation to the state, Bloomington IU Law School is viewed by Plager as a "national law school."

He said "it is a resource that has importance far beyond the boundaries of Indiana," and there is a need for its participation in the development of federal policies, laws and issues.

SHELDON PLAGER

New law school dean is a jogger and a sailor with strong beliefs.

Scholarship and research mark new IU law dean

IU news

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