First Student at UCI Law School is a Local who Taught High School English
Orange County Native Got the Acceptance Call as She Taught 10th Graders at Gabrielino High School

By Don J. DeBenedictis
Daily Journal Staff Writer

IRVINE - At 2:40 in the afternoon on Feb. 10, 2009, the telephone rang in Acrivi Coromelas's classroom at Gabrielino High School in San Gabriel.

It was Dean Erwin Chemerinsky making one of 110 calls he would make to students offered admission to the inaugural class of the UCI School of Law. Congratulations, Chemerinsky told Coromelas, I hope you decide to attend, can I answer any questions?

Coromelas thanked the dean, told him she would be coming to his new law school and then said something like, "I'm teaching; I gotta go." She hung up and went back to explaining Afghan history to her 10th grade English class to help them as they read Khaled Hosseini's novel, "The Kite Runner."

Chemerinsky, meanwhile, dashed across the office to tell his dean of students, "We've got our first student."

Coromelas appears to be somewhere between stunned and amused to be UCI law's first student. She said she is both honored and nervous about all the interviews she's been called on to give.

"To commit to UCI was such an easy decision that I still feel surprised about how much attention is being given to me for being the first one to decide."

The 27-year-old Orange County native could be seen as the very model of a UCI law student. Of course, "she's wonderful as all our students are wonderful," said Assistant Dean of Student Services Victoria Ortiz.

She also is a young woman with stellar academic chops, life experience and a previous career, and a dedication to social justice.

Baptized at Anaheim's big Greek Orthodox church, St. John the Baptist, Coromelas grew up in a multi-ethnic neighborhood in Cypress. She attended Denison University in Ohio, then transferred to Grinnell College in Iowa.

Education at Grinnell "focused a lot on how do we create a just society," she said. She also was on the women's softball and basketball teams.

Torn between becoming a teacher or a lawyer, Coromelas initially picked teaching in order to have an immediate impact on young people's lives. She got her education degree from the Claremont
Graduate School and quickly began teaching in San Gabriel - even commuting from her home in Buena Park.

Then she changed her mind. "I wanted a way to make more of a macro ... lasting change [in society]," Coromelas said. "I decided to join the legal profession."

She applied to several schools and eventually received scholarship offers from USC and the University of Minnesota, among others. She settled on UCI after hearing a presentation from Ortiz in October.

Chemerinsky's promise of a full, three-year scholarship to all members of the inaugural class influenced her decision, of course. But, Coromelas said, "to me, my education is so valuable, I wouldn't take a full-ride scholarship if I didn't know ... the school's plan would be a good fit for what I plan to do."

The free tuition "wouldn't have made me come here" by itself, she said.

Still, she was the first to tell the dean she was coming. As a result, with several TV cameras and all the students and faculty looking on, Coromelas early Monday cut the ribbon that opened the law school.

By mid-afternoon Wednesday, she could say that she'd had "a great 2½ days."

"The professors are really, really excited," she said. "All my classmates are really excited ... We've had great discussions" in class and afterwards.

Like most beginning law students, Coromelas is working harder than she expected, even given all the warnings she'd received. "The reading is incredibly challenging," she said. "I'm surprised by how often I have to read a sentence over again."

Given the 3-to-1 faculty-student ratio and the epidemic enthusiasm, she's had no problem asking professors questions such as "what does this mean?" or "in light of this, how does that make sense?"

On the other hand, Coromelas loves studying in the sparsely populated library, which she called "amazing."

"I can have three tables all to myself."

don_debenedictis@dailyjournal.com

*******
© 2009 Daily Journal Corporation. All rights reserved.