

PROFILE: NATASCHA FASTABEND





Building Success from Scratch

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James Marion

A year and a half ago, Natascha Fastabend was spending her days working for Golden Gate University School of Law (GGU Law) as a program coordinator. Her nights were spent in a GGU Law classroom, studying to complete her LL.M. in taxation. At the same time, across town, University of San Francisco School of Law (USF Law) had much to offer its incoming class on their path to becoming new attorneys. But one thing it could not offer was an LL.M. in taxation. Today this is no longer the case. An inaugural class of twenty-six tax LL.M. students just completed their first academic year at USF, and they are doing so under the diligent stewardship of the program's associate director, Natascha Fastabend.

The rapid sea change at USF is due in large part to Fastabend herself, whom the school hired in February 2014 to create the tax LL.M. from the ground up. She had only six months before the first students were expected to walk through the door.

"I think I surprised even myself," Fastabend recalls. "The project and the opportunity it presented were so exciting. It wasn't until that first day showing up to work where I stepped back for a second and thought, 'OK, this is daunting.'" Fortunately, the demands of the business at hand, and the associated time constraints, left little time for reflection. "You could definitely say I hit the ground running," she explains. "If there was any time to reflect on how I'd gotten myself into this position, it was fleeting."

CARVING OUT A PATH

Fastabend's journey to becoming associate director of the LL.M. in taxation program is perhaps a little atypical. While a career in the legal world seemed likely—Fastabend's mother earned her J.D. through USF's night program while raising her, and Fastabend herself graduated from University of Washington with a B.A. in political science and law, societies, and justice—the choice of tax law as an area of expertise, as well as the driving force behind a career in academia, was unanticipated.

"My initial interest in the law centered on criminal justice," Fastabend remembers. Indeed, she spent four years working for the

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Department of Justice while an undergraduate in Seattle. “I wanted to help people, and that seemed like the obvious choice of a field where I would have that opportunity,” she explains. “I was never a big fan of the litigious side of the practice. I like talking to people and learning about who they are so I can help solve their problems, not so I can win confrontations against them.”



Upon graduation, Fastabend brought that sentiment with her when she returned home to the Bay Area and began her legal education at GGU Law. She started taking night classes before transitioning to a full-time schedule. By the time of graduation, her attentions had shifted toward tax law. She recalled how a career in this branch of the law began to make sense. “I found that tax crossed over into almost every facet of the law. For me this made the discipline much more interesting than most people probably assume.” But paramount to Fastabend was that tax still allowed an opportunity for altruism. “I could solve problems that would help the client,” she explains. “Tax law

protects businesses, careers, it protects estates—ultimately it protects families and their children. It protects people.” With new motivation, Fastabend decided to return to GGU Law to pursue an LL.M. in taxation part time, and would eventually gain crucial experience working for GGU Law’s program as a coordinator.

STARTING AT SQUARE ONE

So how exactly does one prepare him- or herself to engineer an LL.M. taxation program at a school where no such program has previously existed? How does one approach an undertaking of that size and complexity when he or she has never done it before? When I ask Fastabend, she laughs, “Great question. I’m not really sure I have a single answer. I knew I wanted our first class to be emblematic of a top-notch program. From there I started looking at examples of what that kind of program looks like and started assembling the pieces as quickly as possible. Of course, it’s crucial to have lots of help.”

Fastabend credits much of the program’s early success to her collaboration with permanent faculty members E. L. Wiegand Distinguished Professor in Tax Daniel Lathrope, as well the law school’s Associate Dean Joshua Davis. “This team has been amazing to work with,” Fastabend comments. “This doesn’t happen without coordination between a lot of talented people.” It also does not happen without a ton of groundwork.

High on Fastabend’s endless to-do list were tasks like “form a curriculum,” “recruit a staff of adjunct professors,” “locate campus space,” and, of course, “find students!”

“It’s a good thing I enjoy talking with people,” Fastabend jokes. “Sometimes it feels like that’s 95 percent of what I do.” It is clearly also one of her strong suits. Within sixth months, she had hired more than fifteen adjunct professors, all of them practitioners. “I was pounding the pavement,” she recalls. “I went to my network. I wanted professors currently working in the field—professionals who could share real-world experience with the students. Our classes all meet in the evening to accommodate the faculty’s work schedules.” Fastabend also recognizes the secondary benefits of a practicing faculty. “Students sometimes learn

the most through internships and clerkships,” she admits. “I wanted a staff that would be a portal to those opportunities.” To that end, Fastabend has also seen that the program encourages students to pursue externships through strategic relationships with industry mainstays.

Diversity among the faculty was another crucial component for Fastabend. “I wanted people working for the government and in the private sector,” she explains. “I also wanted to make sure we had women on the staff, because unfortunately that’s a rarity in tax.” She then happily reported her success in hiring two women into the program for the first year.

CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS

Fastabend’s response to my mentioning her previous lack of managerial experience is telling of her successes. “The upside there is that I can relate very well to the students, you know, because I was a student until recently.” In fact, Fastabend technically still is a student. “She knows substantive tax law,” explains USF School of Law Dean John Trasviña. “She is in the process of working toward a tax LL.M. herself.”

These days, finding the time to complete her degree likely poses more of a challenge than ever. Still, Fastabend’s colleagues obviously agree that her close connection to the student body is an asset. Adjunct professor and special attorney in the Office of Chief Counsel at the IRS Davis Yee describes it this way, “I’ve seen time and time again her unparalleled dedication to students. In fact, just last week we were talking about internships she had set up, and she called to solicit my input as to which students would benefit the most from them. So while she creates a collaborative working environment with adjuncts, her focus always goes back to the students in the program. And that is the main reason I enjoy working with her.”

Fastabend’s perspective has influenced myriad present and pending innovations aimed at creating easier access and scheduling for students, many of whom are balancing their time at USF with full- or part-time employment.

She sees technology as a crucial means to that end. “The concept of the ‘flip classroom’ is the trend in programs across the country,” she explains. “The idea is that students stream their lectures online at their convenience, while class time is essentially reserved for what would traditionally be considered ‘homework.’” Any recent graduate of a bar exam prep course would likely acknowledge the benefits of this approach.

As a crowning achievement in the quest for convenience, Fastabend points to her involvement in finding a new home for the program in expanded space at USF’s campus in downtown San Francisco. “This was a real coup,” she admits. “It puts our program at the center of the action.”

REFLECTING ON ACCOMPLISHMENT

It is entirely understandable that Fastabend does not choose to wax philosophical about where her career has taken her over the past year. Her schedule has not allowed her the luxury. She does concede that what she expected to be a life-changing opportunity has proven to be that, and then some. She also concedes that anticipating the job to be a great challenge was perhaps an underestimation. But she is quick to add that this has been one of the most invigorating and exciting years in her professional life.

To get a sense of her achievement, one only needs to ask Fastabend’s colleagues. They speak of her in terms of “great,” “enthusiastic,” “boundlessly energetic,” “happy,” “amazing,” “crucial,” “a tremendous asset,” “very lucky to have her,” and “all-time favorite,” to name a few. For her part, Fastabend found the most reward in watching the diverse class of students she had recruited from across the country assemble at USF’s campus for the start of their first semester. “That was the payoff for me,” she beams. “These students are here to advance their careers and better their lives. I can say I played a part in that.”

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