

Credit: Vector Goddess/Shutterstock.com

Can You Change How Lawyers Think and Work? Inside LawWithoutWalls' International Initiative

LawWithoutWalls is teaching law students around the world what they don't learn in law school—that innovation and collaboration are key to solving real-world problems.

December 14, 2021 at 01:00 AM 8 minute read

Innovation

Lisa Shuchman Executive Editor, Law.com International

The original version of this story was published on Law.com International

Michele DeStefano is trying to fundamentally change the way lawyers think and work, and she's tackling the challenge globally.

From Australia, Iceland, South Africa, the United States, the United Kingdom and beyond, she is enabling law students, business leaders and law firm partners to collaborate and develop new skill sets and perspectives by working together to solve real-life problems.

"The goal is to teach both practicing lawyers and aspiring lawyers how to hone the DNA of an innovator, because that's really how legal professionals learn how to proactively collaborate in the way that clients really want them to," DeStefano says.

Fourteen years ago, the University of Miami law professor founded LawWithoutWalls, and since then, she has been fostering innovation in the law and educating a profession that is known to be slow to adapt and embrace change.

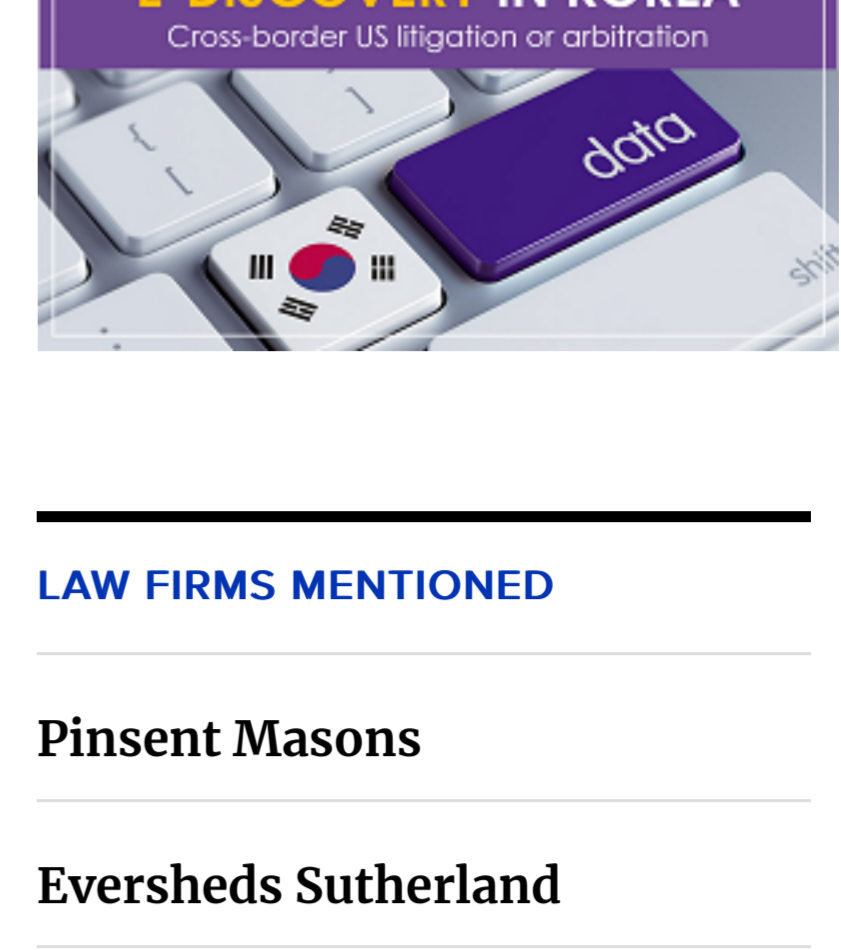
Participants in the four-month program, which is known by the acronym LWOW, develop empathy, self-awareness, cultural competency, inclusivity, flexibility, ability to take risks and to question with an open mind—skills that usually aren't taught in law schools.

Projects have included a blockchain and software solution to manage syndicated loan transactions; an AI-driven solution that cuts the response time for request-for-proposals by automatically searching and suggesting best practice answers, using a firm's most successful proposals as a data source; and a bot optimizing in-house knowledge management by automatically identifying, tagging, and uploading external legal advice.

There are also social projects, such as making the legal marketplace more inclusive and more accessible to people with disabilities, and an app that provides consumers with consistent information on food freshness to combat food waste in the home.

Lawyers need a more collaborative and creative approach to solving problems, DeStefano says.

"Most lawyers want to rush to solve and come to the start with the solution as opposed to starting with the problem. That's the opposite of what clients want, because the minute you do that, you're actually cutting off avenues to more creative collaborative solutions," she says.



LAW FIRMS MENTIONED

Pinsent Masons

Eversheds Sutherland

Ballard Spahr

White & Case

TRENDING STORIES

Sidley Announces Market Bonuses, Following A Year Of Raises And New Perks

THE AMERICAN LAWYER

Law Firms Are Struggling to Make the Hybrid Model Work

THE AMERICAN LAWYER

Why Too Many Partners Misread Their Value to Law Firms

THE AMERICAN LAWYER

Bonuses and Beyond: Law Firms Wrap Up Lucrative Year With Record-High Rewards

THE AMERICAN LAWYER

Judge Deals Blow to Key Capitol Riot Defense in Obstruction Ruling

NATIONAL LAW JOURNAL

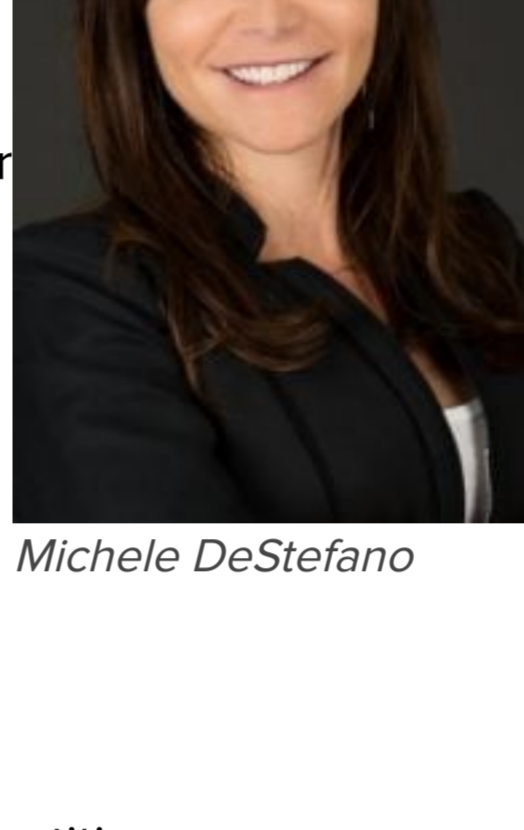
China Law & Practice Awards 2021. The annual China Law & Practice Awards is the jurisdiction's most prestigious legal awards ceremony that applauds China's elite.

And coming at problems with just legal solutions doesn't work. Lawyers, she says, need to see the big picture.

"There are no problems that are solely legal today," she explains. "They all have other ramifications: regulatory, public relations, marketing, business and financial repercussions, and human resources."

Benefits to Law Firms and In-House Lawyers

The program teams up law and business school students with legal and business professionals, including marketers and entrepreneurs, and assigns them a challenge from a corporate legal department, law firm or legal services company.



Michele DeStefano

sponsoring entity is facing. It can relate to operations, process or corporate social responsibility. Spotify, HSBC, Microsoft, White & Case, Pinsent Masons and Eversheds Sutherland are among the list of recent sponsors.

And it's not just the law students learning from the established practitioners, DeStefano says. By working with "green, earnest and creative" law students, established practitioners open their minds to the possibility that ideas can come from lots of different places and that their expertise, in combination with a new way of approaching a problem, can provide a much better solution.

Steve Mehr, a real estate partner at Ballard Spahr in Los Angeles and Salt Lake City, for example, says the program has changed the way he works with junior lawyers. Mehr, who participated in the program as a student and now acts as a Law Without Walls mentor, says he no longer assumes he knows the best way to tackle an issue, and will take it to his team to see if they have a different perspective.

"The response has more depth and it considers other options, and the value for the client I think comes from the other potential solutions than just a normal 'this is what the statute says, this is how I would deal with the issue.'"

James Batham, a U.K.-based partner with Eversheds Sutherland, has worked on numerous LWOW projects as a leader, mentor or participant, and last year participated in a team to build a legal project management app.

Batham says LWOW can identify problems that might become viable projects for a firm and its clients, but the real benefit is "the change in mindset and relationships built with clients and colleagues, which means everyone is better equipped as innovators to deal with subsequent real-world challenges."

The program has even contributed to Eversheds' increased revenue, he says, noting that it has helped the firm's teams gain an understanding of the problems clients have and an approach that works for them. "This has embedded trust on both sides," he says.

In non-COVID times, LWOW participants assemble somewhere in the world for face-to-face meetings then work together remotely (LWOW was using video conferencing long before it became a mainstream corporate tool during the pandemic) before assembling once again to present their project. It has been run wholly virtually throughout the pandemic.

Benefits to Law Students

While law firms and their clients benefit from the program, DeStefano focuses primarily on students. She says through the LWOW, they learn leadership skills because they are at the core of their teams. They gain cultural competency and cultural awareness they wouldn't have developed without working with people from around the world. And finally, they have opportunities to network with people from all over the world.

"It's like a job interview on steroids," DeStefano says.

Aleeza Freedman, legal counsel at the Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General, says the program, which she took part in during her final year of law school in 2019, helped her hone soft skills in teamwork, cultural competency. But it gave her valuable hard skills as well.

"It also taught me about making a business case, branding/marketing, narrowly defining a problem, researching, working with technology, and delivering a five-minute presentation," she says. "LWOW will not teach you the law like law school does, but instead focuses on equipping you with innovative skills that you may not otherwise have developed in the classroom."

Phomolo Khitsane, who participated in LWOW while a student at the University of Witwatersrand and is now a trainee lawyer at Poswa Inc Attorneys in Johannesburg, says the program required him to "search into the unknown" and learn to "think outside the box," rather than rush to resolve a problem.

Kristófer Kristjánsson, a law student at Reykjavik University in Iceland, says he's "not necessarily a better Icelandic lawyer" for having done the LWOW program, but it brought other benefits, including helping him develop valuable collaboration skills. While in the program, his perspectives were challenged by interacting with students, business people and lawyers from China and North and South America, he said, and he gained from their knowledge and insight.

"I've never had an experience like that at law school," said Kristjánsson, who worked on an LWOW project sponsored by legal consultancy Legal Mosaic to help gig workers understand their legal rights and responsibilities.

He believes LWOW will help lawyers become more adaptable as the profession changes with society, technology and automation.

For Nicola Jerkovic, a law and engineering student at Swinburne University in eastern Australia, the project has had more immediate and tangible benefits—helping her build her resume and gain internships. She is now working at a legal tech startup.

"I got my current job a few months after finishing LWOW, and I'm sure it was an influential experience in getting me hired," she said.

As a participant in Law Without Walls, she worked on a project in which she and other students from around the world helped the legal team at audio streaming platform Spotify develop a contracts tool that saves time and money and reduces risk.

Maurus Schreyvogel, chief legal innovation officer at drugmaker Novartis in Basel, Switzerland, has chosen to be a mentor for Law Without Walls and he says the experience has helped him work with other lawyers and outside counsel, who can be set in their ways.

"Law Without Walls gave me additional instruments to help deal with lawyers who'd like to jump to conclusions," he says, noting that structures like billable hours and the competition for promotions make lawyers "ego shooters," and undoing this is very hard.

Taking part in LWOW as a mentor is a huge time commitment, but Schreyvogel says he enjoys the collaborative spirit, which gives him a break and a chance to recharge his batteries after constantly struggling to get legal professionals to change the way they work.

"It's a source of energy for me that usually lasts very long because I know there is hope for our profession—if not immediately then maybe by the next generation of professionals that are entering the market right now."

You Might Like

'We Can Do This': How a Law Student is Using 3D Printers to Help Health Care Workers. By Angela Morris. 1 minute read.

November 04, 2021 The Four Primary Drivers of Change in the Modern Business of Law. By Brad Rogers. 6 minute read.

November 22, 2021 Women of Legal Tech: Emily Hostage and Why Legal Could Understand Tech If They Tried. By Alma Asay. 8 minute read.

December 10, 2021 Becoming C-Sweet: John Reikes, TRU Staffing Partners. By Jared Coseglia, TRU Staffing Partners. 5 minute read.

December 10, 2021 Becoming C-Sweet: John Reikes, TRU Staffing Partners. By Jared Coseglia, TRU Staffing Partners. 5 minute read.

November 22, 2021 Women of Legal Tech: Emily Hostage and Why Legal Could Understand Tech If They Tried. By Alma Asay. 8 minute read.

How to Remove Dental Tartar. New tool allows you to easily remove plaque and tartar from your teeth (without dentist). Plaque Blaster. Open >

More From ALM. Resources: CLE Center, Legal Compass, Events & Webcasts, Lawjobs, Professional Announcements. Includes download links for various whitepapers.

Legal Newswire. DENSO in Price Fixing Class Action Lawsuits. DarioHealth Announces Two New Contracts within the Employer and Provider Markets. Kahn Swick & Foti, LLC Investigates Adequacy of Price and Process in Proposed Sa... The Schall Law Firm Announces the Filing of a Class Action Lawsuit Against Play...

Submit a press release

Sign Up Today and Never Miss Another Story. As a part of your digital membership, you can sign up for an unlimited number of a wide range of complimentary newsletters. Subscribe to ALM Legal Publications Newsletters.