

# CHICAGO LAWYER

## COURTROOM TO CLASSROOM

Former attorney earns top award for teaching with legal future in mind

By Melissa Rubalcaba Riske



**A**s a patent litigator, Bob Barz was tenacious with his arguments. Today, his drive is propelling him among his peers in the classroom as he recently accepted a top state teaching honor.

In December, Barz was named Outstanding High School Teacher of the Year by the Illinois Network of Charter Schools. It's an honor that shocked him and drew loud cheers from his students at Legal Prep Charter Academy in Chicago.

Barz never intended to become a teacher. He was a partner at K&L Gates. He never imagined himself grading papers and advising students, nor working at a school where students know all too well the realities of gun violence and the threat of gangs.

There are two sides to every case. While Barz didn't plan on becoming an educator, the award confirms that he has gone above and beyond. He is making an impact at a small school where he hopes some students will find their way into the legal profession.

### FOOTBALL AND MEDICAL SCHOOL

As an undergrad at Northwestern University in Evanston, Barz played football and had his sights set on medical school. From quarterback to linebacker, he played with the Big Ten program for four years.

He majored in biomedical engineering. As a senior, while working on a project, Barz delved into the patent process and found his interests have changed. He switched to law school and took his LSATs during the spring of his senior year. By fall, he was taking classes at John Marshall Law School (now UIC Law School).

He began his legal career at Bell Boyd, which later became part of K&L Gates. He became partner in 2014. Busy with his career and being a father of three, life was moving fast. Then he received a call and the wheels of change were set in motion.

Barz was in the patent office in Washington, D.C. when he received a call from his wife. She was concerned about their daughter, Emma, because the pediatrician sensed something was wrong. The doctor advised her to take her daughter to the emergency room. Barz immediately flew back to Chicago. Doctors told them that Emma had a brain tumor. Surgery was done the next day. A few days post-surgery, doctors delivered more bad news — the tumor was cancerous.

Doctors prescribed chemotherapy and radiation. Barz remembers trying to keep up with his work, worrying about his client's cases while sitting in the hospital room as his 3-year-old daughter underwent treatment. A father of three, Barz decided he needed to make a change. He needed to be more present with his family. Today, Emma is healthy and thriving.

"The call from (my wife) that day, it was one of those life-changing moments," Barz said.

### LEGAL-THEME HIGH SCHOOL

A teaching job at Legal Prep, where he could bring his legal background into the classroom, seemed appealing.

"What can I do as a job and still use a lot of the skills I have, but in a less stressful, more scheduled environment?" Barz recalled asking himself.

He found some irony in the idea of becoming a teacher, just like his parents. His dad taught in high school and colleges in the Chicago suburbs. His mother was a long-time professor at North Central College in Naperville.

"There was a mutual understanding. My parents didn't want me to be a teacher and I never thought about wanting to teach," Barz said. "Obviously, it must have rubbed off."

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Sam Finkelstein, CEO and co-founder of Legal Prep

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Legal Prep is Chicago's only high school with a legal-themed curriculum. The school opened in 2012 in Chicago's West Garfield Park neighborhood where poverty, gangs and gun violence are challenges. Barz is cognizant of the vast differences between the world where he teaches, the suburban community where he grew up and in the neighborhood where he raises his children.

Barz also sees past the differences and knows his students aren't that different from his own children. Young people love sports, watching videos on their phone and show great compassion for those around them.

Sam Finkelstein, CEO and co-founder of Legal Prep, said some people may have seen it as a risk in terms of hiring Barz, who had no prior teaching experience, but he didn't see it that way.

"He's kind of that unicorn, having his professional law experience and he is great with kids," Finkelstein said.

Barz said his experience of being nimble and thinking quickly in the courtroom combined with being a father made it easy to feel at home in the classroom. The transition from the courtroom to the classroom hasn't always proved successful, Finkelstein said. In some instances, legal professionals expected to command respect in the classroom, only to find out their stellar resume wasn't enough to impress high school students.

"The kids have to know you care and when they do, they will trust you," said Finkelstein, who was an attorney with Locke Lord prior to helping to establish Legal Prep.

Barz is now a certified teacher. The courses he teaches for upperclassmen have included constitutional law, criminal processes and issues in criminal justice. His students can earn dual credit through City Colleges of Chicago.



Bob Barz celebrates with his Chicago Legal Prep Academy students after winning the Outstanding High School Teacher by the Illinois Network of Charter Schools. Photo courtesy of Chicago Legal Prep Academy



"It's a huge benefit," Finkelstein said, adding how Barz helped develop the dual credit for his courses.

### OUTSTANDING TEACHER

Barz's award from Illinois Network of Charter Schools marks the second time one of the Legal Prep's faculty has been recognized, according to Finkelstein. He added that nominating Barz for the award was unanimously supported by the faculty.

As Barz has become proficient in his classroom work, he has accepted more responsibility among his peers, taking the lead for the English and Law department and working on the school's educational policies.

He's even utilized his football skills, helping to lead an intramural 7-on-7 football program for the school.



Barz and his students hoist a trophy after winning a spring mock trial competition. Photo courtesy of Legal Prep Charter Academy.

"I'm lucky enough to wear several different hats at the school," Barz said.

While Legal Prep offers legal courses, students travel varying paths when they graduate. Some have chosen to continue their education. Barz said he had a recent visit from a former student who enlisted in the military. He said there is a desperate need for diversity in the legal field and while the students at Legal Prep can fill those demographics, the path to law school has its hurdles.

"We do have a lot of students who struggle in college," Barz said. "A lot are the first generation in college where they face discrimination, a lot of homesickness. There are obstacles, like the red tape of finances."

He believes that the legal concepts he presents, the push to encourage students' critical thinking and teaching them to advocate for themselves will prove useful life skills beyond the classroom.

Grading exams and lesson planning from his classroom as police cars whizz through the neighborhood is far different than the courtrooms and deposition conference rooms. Since joining Legal Prep in 2017, Barz has come to embrace his role as an educator.

"The kids know I practiced law. (But) I present myself as a teacher first and foremost," Barz said.

He said receiving the award as an Outstanding High School Teacher of the Year was an awesome experience, but what he remembers most is the genuine excitement from his students who joined in celebrating the honors during a surprise ceremony at the school, that true to its theme, was designed like a mock trial.

"It was a true testament to my teaching abilities and that's the part that means the most."

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