

U of H law dean discusses job's challenges

by Andrew Bell
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The students and faculty of the law school at Texas Tech had the chance Tuesday afternoon to listen to one of the few and the proud.

But she is not a Marine. She is one of the few and the proud female deans in the country.

Nancy Rapoport, dean and professor of law at the University of Houston Law Center, came to Tech to speak about her experiences as a female dean.

Rapoport is one of 33 female deans in the history of institutions of higher education. Her speech, "Images of Women Lawyers in the Media and Why Those Images Matter," was held in the forum at 12:30.

Anthonette Okorodudu, a second-year law student from League City, came to Rapoport's speech because of the dean's status in the nation.

"I came for the fact that there are very few women deans in academics," she said.

Rapoport's career in law began at Stanford, where she received her J.D., she said. After she received her degree, she went to San Francisco to practice bankruptcy law. Rapoport explained how practicing bankruptcy law is similar to her job as a dean.

"Bankruptcy is similar to being a dean in that you have to deal with a scarce resource and the people who are fighting for that resource," Rapoport said.

Rapoport's first university job was with Ohio State University.

"Being a law professor is the world's best job. As a professor, you can put a stamp on a student's education ... You get to be behind other people's success. It is one of the most satisfying feelings in the world," she said.

The next job Rapoport held was associate dean for student affairs for Ohio State.

This led the way to her job as dean and professor for the University of Nebraska College of Law in 1998, she said.

Rapoport said the transition to Nebraska was hard but it was beneficial. As a newcomer, she did not know any of key officials in the state. However, she said she was given the benefit of the doubt.

"The year before I (became) dean, there were only 13 of us. Four others began to dean the same year that I did," she said.

In 2000, Rapoport returned to Texas to become dean and professor at the Law Center at Houston. She said the move to Texas was a dream come true.

"Houston is home for me. I would have never dreamed that I would have been able to do the things that I have done from growing up where I did," Rapoport said.

During her speech, Rapoport discussed what it takes to be a successful female dean.

Just as any other dean, she is a representative to constituents and regulates law school policies. One of the most important aspects of her job is alumni support.

"I will go to Las Vegas soon to have breakfast with a group of alumni. Then I will be going to New York for the same thing," she said.

She also said it can be a lonely job, because her job includes having to fire faculty and make important decisions that affect the school.

Although some aspects of the job can be lonely, others have led her to people and places she might not have seen.

"I've thrown the first pitch at a Nebraska baseball game. I also got to fly a shuttle simulator," Rapoport said.

As with any job, she finds some things frustrating. One of Rapoport's passions has always been teaching. Now that her responsibilities are split, she is only able to teach one class, she said.

"Being a dean is a large job. I work about 80 hours a week and I haven't slept eight hours a night since I don't know when," she said.

The job also affects the way she conducts everyday life.

Long hours and constant meetings will not allow time for a family, she said.

"If I had children, I wouldn't be able to do my job," Rapoport said.

She also loses out on personal contact.

Rapoport said she no longer socializes with faculty one on one. If she has a serious appointment with a faculty member or anyone else, she always has a witness present.

Rapoport said it is necessary to recognize certain things about the real world and oneself in order to be successful.

"Stereotypes will be there, but everyone has stereotypes thrust against them. As you go out to succeed, face them or be aware of the stereotypes," she said.

She also said it is important for people to understand their personas in order to pass any barriers or conflicts that may get in the way.

Rapoport is also working on achieving her ultimate goal of becoming a university president.

Despite her long hours with the Law Center in Houston, she is in the process of writing a book.

