Podcast 15 – Writing Right While Righting Wrongs

PROFESSOR FORCESE: Welcome back. In this brief podcast, Professors Ellen Zweibel and Virginia McCrae talk about the virtues of excellent legal writing and the means by which you can acquire this skill.

PROFESSOR MCCRAE: I’ll introduce Professor Zweibel. She’s the co-Director and Founder of the University of Ottawa’s Law School’s Legal Writing Academy. A Former tax practitioner, Proefessor Zweibel has been teaching for over 30 years and legal writing is her passion

PROFESSOR ZWEIBEL: And I would like to introduce Professor Virginia McCrae, the Academy’s program co-Director. Professor McCrae joined the Academy after 28 years with the Department of Justice where as Assistant Deputy Minister she directed the professional development and training of all Justice Department’s staff. Legal writing was a centerpiece of that program. Together we’re going to tell you in 5 minutes flat everything you need to know about legal writing. Set your watch. Here goes.

PROFESSOR MCCRAE: You ask any lawyer, judge or more importantly any client what makes the difference between an average lawyer and a great one, they will tell you that your ability to communicate clearly, concisely and in the simplest language possible is the key.

PROFESSOR ZWEIBEL: Justice Laskin of the Ontario Court of Appeal is fond of saying “The hardest thing in law school is to learn to write like a real person, not a lawyer. This means you think like a lawyer, but write so that your next-door neighbor knows exactly what you mean.”

PROFESSOR MCCRAE: In law school you are going to learn to think like a lawyer. You will learn to take complex rules and complicated facts and make sense of them. You are going to read probably more than you’ve read in your life so far and you’re going to read new kinds of material.

PROFESSOR ZWEIBEL: Most students come to law school thinking that being a great lawyer is all about standing up before a judge and jury and eloquently arguing their case. That’s just a tiny piece of it. Every great advocate knows that the case is won or lost on written submissions.

PROFESSOR MCCRAE: Now the good news is that we’re going to help you learn to write those complex complicated legal points like a real person. The Legal Writing Academy and Student Services have courses, worksops and peer mentors to turn you into competent and confident legal writers.

PROFESSOR ZWEIBEL: Starting in September, in the first week of your Dispute Resolution and Professional Responsibility course, you will write your first Writing Academy legal memo. You will get quick and helpful feedback to get you started. We will follow that up with workshops, which we call Writing Cafés, and peer mentoring sessions.

PROFESSOR MCCRAE: So watch for the posters because you will not want to miss these interactive sessions. And mark your calendars.

This is Professor Zweibel and Professor McCrae, signing off until September.