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Teaching the Rule of Law

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Teaching the rule of law

His is a calm voice of reason amid countries in crisis.

Nearly a decade after he retired from the Washington State Supreme Court, the steady voice of Justice Robert Utter '52 continues to encourage the rule of law, often in countries around the world. Utter is a volunteer for the Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative (CEELI) Institute, a public service project of the American Bar Association that brings law to new and emerging democracies throughout the world.

Utter, who spent 24 years on the Washington State Supreme Court and served as chief justice from 1979 to 1981, now finds himself assisting with dispute resolution and judicial seminars, establishing courts and constitutions, advising on administrative procedures and teaching courses on international criminal law, international commercial law, international human rights law and anti-corruption law at the CEELI Institute in Prague.

Last year, Utter assisted the Moldovan government in negotiations for a new constitution and took part in an annual judicial conference in Albania. His travels have taken him to Bulgaria, Russia, Latvia, Albania, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia, the Czech Republic and a host of other countries.

"I was always interested in international law and the impact of democracy on new societies," said Utter, who was asked to take part in the CEELI program while on the Supreme Court and teaching constitutional law at Seattle University. "This was a way to do that. Like everything good that's happened in my life, it was done by accident, not by plan. It's been a wonderful adventure."

With 50 years of law experience to his credit, Utter has witnessed a myriad of changes since earning his J.D. from the University of Washington School of Law in 1954. That same year, desegregation was launched by *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the landmark Supreme Court decision aimed at ending segregation in public schools. Utter has also seen a monumental leap in the empowerment of women, and said he's been impressed by the sensitivity of law and society regarding full utilization of women's talents.

Utter is accompanied on most trips by his wife of 50 years, Betty (Stevenson) Utter '53, a retired teacher and counselor who teaches graduate-level counseling at St. Martins College in Washington. Betty typically teaches English during the trips.

Their marriage has flourished over the years because of a solid foundation based on religious faith, similar values and a commitment to working things out, Utter said.

"Linfield was a marvelous place to find someone like this," he said. "The simple fact is that (Betty) is the most important thing in my life. Nothing I have accomplished could have been done without her encouragement and support. We have been partners in everything in our lives."

In addition to volunteering for CEELI, Utter is called upon in the same capacity by the U.S. State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development. His commitment to volunteerism has been recognized by a number of organizations, most recently by the American Bar Association when he was named Volunteer of the Year for his work with developing countries. Yet he remains modest about his accomplishments.

"My work is a small pebble compared with what others do," he said. "It's been a great privilege. The greatest has been to see the dedication of people around the world under incredible circumstances working to develop the rule of law in their own countries.

"I'm thankful that I've been able to help develop democratic institutions in other countries. It's incremental, with no dramatic results. You do it with the hope that it will make a difference to somebody. But no guarantees."

— Laura Davis

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