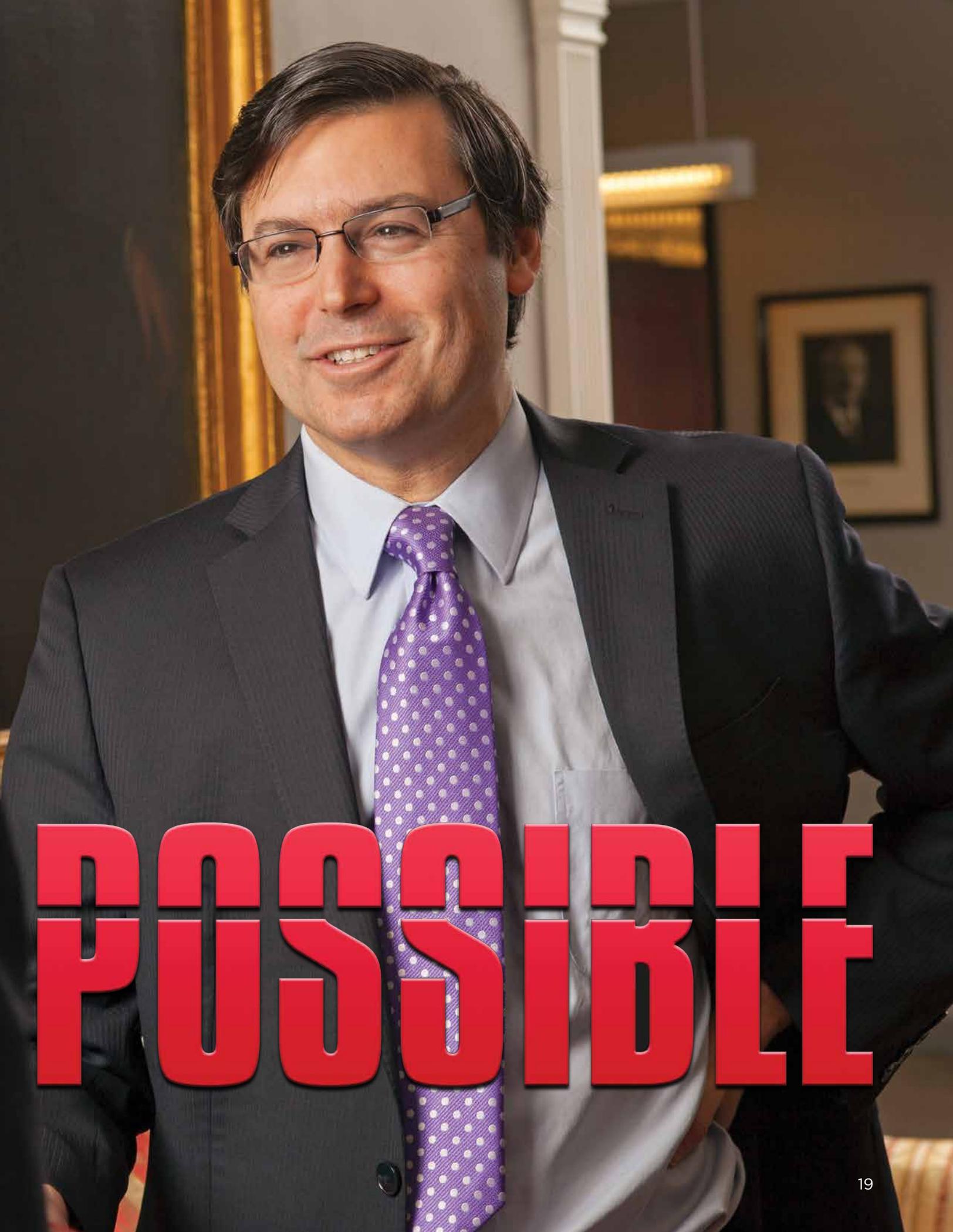


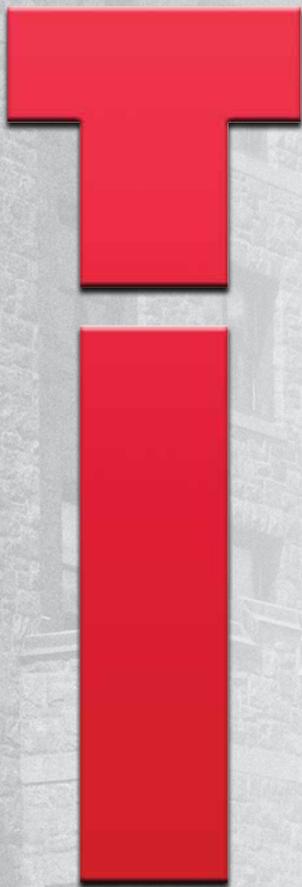
Meet
David Yassky
Pace Law's
Transformative
New Dean

MISSION: MISSION:

BY LINDA BRANDT MYERS



POSSIBLE



THE TASK SEEMS AS DAUNTING AS A “MISSION IMPOSSIBLE” MOVIE (CUE THE tension-inducing percussion and brass, watch Tom Cruise hang from a helicopter by his fingernails).

Unfortunately in real life the message won’t self-destruct in five seconds. The drop in jobs for graduates, and accompanying plunge in enrollment are all too persistent for most law schools these days, even as the economy recovers. Indeed, Bloomberg News just proclaimed that “it is probably the worst time in decades to be a law school.”

But what may seem like a towering assignment is exactly the kind of challenge that excites and inspires David Yassky. “It’s going to be a ball,” he quipped when he took office last April as Pace Law School’s 10th dean.

He brings to the job not just enthusiasm, but an impressive track record of driving change and tackling difficult problems—surprising skeptics in the process. “David has the complete package for a new type of dean in a new world of law where business as usual is not an option,” says Nicholas Allard, dean of Brooklyn Law School, where Dean Yassky was a faculty member in from 1998 to 2002. “In addition to his significant credentials in academic education he has a track record of transformational change in the public sector. He knows how to assess what needs to be done and how to do it.”

Stephen Saxl, a litigator at Greenberg Traurig LLP, who has been a friend of Dean Yassky’s since Yale Law School, agrees. “David is able to enjoy academia at the highest level but at the same time has the people skills and practical sense to apply his thinking. I think both abilities will serve him well at Pace Law and make him a great dean.”

From Torts to Taxicabs, and Back Again

Yassky comes to the Pace Law deanship after a remarkably varied career in law and government. After graduating from Princeton, where he majored in public policy, he worked for a year in New York City’s Office of Management and Budget. There he met and soon fell in love with Diana Fortuna (the couple married in 1990; she is now Deputy General Manager and CFO at the Metropolitan Opera).

Yassky then enrolled at Yale Law School—where he fell in love a second time. “I just instantly felt at home studying law,” he now says. “This was a way of looking at the world that made deep and profound sense to me. I saw how you could use the law to move things forward.”

After Yale he clerked for U.S. District Judge Stanley Sporkin, and went to work for then-Representative Charles Schumer, whom Dean Yassky calls “the most effective legislator of our time.” Schumer chaired the House Subcommittee on Crime, and Yassky served as the Subcommittee’s chief counsel, helping to pass the Brady Law, Assault Weapons Ban and Violence Against Women Act.

Says Schumer of Dean Yassky: “David was the lynchpin on my House judiciary staff during a particularly critical and productive legislative period. He possesses the kind of multi-level intelligence—from legal analysis to political strategy to media savvy—that is fundamental to making smart and sound public policy as well as to leading a major educational institution.”

After a stint in “BigLaw,” as an associate with the D.C. office of O’Melveny & Myers, Yassky accepted a tenure-track faculty position at Brooklyn Law School and moved with his family to Brooklyn in 1998 (by then he and Diana had two daughters, Susan and Margaret).



“I really enjoyed academia. I enjoyed the students enormously, and did some writing I felt was useful,” says Dean Yassky, who taught criminal and administrative law, and published scholarly articles on the Bill of Rights and federalism. He also remained active in his community as an advocate on gun control and environmental issues—and this work led him back into government.

“There was an open seat for the New York City Council in the district that I live in, and I decided to take a shot at it,” he says, even though his opponent, a well-established political figure, was the odds-on favorite. “Summer is campaign season in New York, and my dean told me: ‘Fine, as long as you’re back teaching in the fall,’” relates Dean Yassky. “I’m pretty sure she assumed I would lose.”

To the surprise of the Brooklyn dean, and many others, he was elected. The dean-to-be’s strategy? “I saw that if I mapped out the district, figured out where the votes came from and how I could appeal to those people, there was a path to win.”

Says Professor Ted Janger, a former colleague and friend at Brooklyn Law School: “David is one of these thoughtful analytical people who’s great at solving puzzles and thinking creatively.”

Yassky served on the City Council from 2002 to 2009. During that time he pushed through legislation that attracted more film and TV production to the city through tax incentives, reduced firearms trafficking by raising penalties against traffickers, and cut fraud by authorizing whistleblower suits against city contractors. His proudest achievement: using the zoning code to impel developers to create much-needed affordable housing. “The New York Times” warmly praised Yassky for his Council service, noting his “stellar record and ability to think creatively and then implement his ideas.”

But Yassky’s most notable public contribution came after the City Council, when he served from 2010 through 2013 as commissioner of New York City’s Taxi and Limousine Commission under then-Mayor Bloomberg. (If you are a regular New York City taxi passenger, you probably recognize Yassky as the guy in the “taxi TV” ads telling you to buckle up.)

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—PROFESSOR BENNETT GERSHMAN

Yassky effected an astonishing turnaround at the TLC that included replacing Manhattan’s aging fleet of yellow cabs with fuel-efficient taxis, and launching an entirely new program of taxi service to the city’s underserved outer boroughs. (Oh, and he got a rate increase for taxi drivers and back pay for those who had been bilked by fleet owners, too.)

“Part of the strength of David’s leadership when he was at the helm of the TLC came from his impatience,” says Emily Gallo, Dean Yassky’s former chief of staff there, who is now chief of staff at the city’s Department of Transportation. “He wanted to accelerate projects as quickly as possible to bring about real improvements for the citizens, the taxi drivers, the owners—all of the stakeholders that we worked for,” Gallo says. “He didn’t accept the answer that, well, this is government, this is the typical timetable, this is how long things take. He remained focused on the big picture, even while he was handling the day-to-day challenges, putting out fires,” she says.

Gallo also praised her former boss’ leadership style. “In meetings David would actively solicit opinions from his staff, ask what they thought. He really listened and tried to understand what people were saying, which gave a lot of validation to the work they were doing and made them feel that if they had concerns, he would certainly hear them.”

Energizing the Pace Law Network

Yassky’s inclusive approach is already in evidence at Pace. “One primary goal for a law school dean is to enlist the support of alumni and bar leaders, along with motivating our internal team of faculty and staff,” says Yassky. “Pace Law School’s success really depends on getting our whole network energized and working together.”

Says Pace alumnus David Wishengrad (JD ’05), partner at Cahill Gordon & Reindel LLP in New York City: “Since Dean Yassky took the position last April he has exhibited an enormous amount of drive and enthusiasm and really seems to be a tireless worker, and very up for this challenge.”

Wishengrad says he was impressed that Dean Yassky reached out to him and other Pace graduates his first week on the job. “He called up and told me he wanted to sit down and get my thoughts on the direction of the school, marketing efforts and that sort of thing. So he came down to my office, we chatted for about an hour and I decided to have a welcoming party for him at my law firm. The school invited a bunch of Pace alums from around New York, and it was terrific.”

Judge Linda Jamieson (JD ’79), a member of Pace Law School’s Board of Visitors and part of the school’s first graduating class, calls Dean Yassky “a bright light. He wants our law school to thrive and not just survive.” She describes the new dean as “very creative, smart, optimistic and energetic, and that’s what we need, certainly in this economy and this market and the changes in the profession itself.”

The new Dean is “very approachable, very down-to-earth, and he has a genuine interest in improving aspects of the school,” says Jennifer Gray (JD ’06), an associate at Keane & Beane P.C., who serves as secretary on Pace Law School’s alumni board.

Gray says she has told the dean that her most valuable experiences at Pace Law were those involving experiential learning such as clinical programs, internships and externships. “One of his big points of emphasis is expanding and building upon those programs that set Pace apart,” Gray says. “I think that’s a good direction to go in because the market is changing. Employers want practice-ready

attorneys. We have to think outside the box to respond to market demands. I think he's a great choice."

Professor Bennett Gershman, a founding faculty member at Pace Law, agrees that career preparation should be at the core of what law schools are about—and he hopes the dean will make that his focus. So far he's impressed with what he's seen.

"David came in here with a tremendous feeling of confidence that he had what it takes to change our trajectory," Professor Gershman says. "He has been out there aggressively, and I mean driven, courting our alums, going to law firms, going to companies, getting contacts and making inroads so he can get our students jobs. I think that's a high priority. That will be the message that will attract students to our school—that we can train them effectively and get them in good jobs. And you know what? I think he's doing it. It's early but I already see signs that the Law School is moving in the right direction and gaining momentum."

"When Dean Yassky came he brought a new perspective on what a law education could be," says Erik Roth, a third-year student. "I got invited to an alumni event at a law firm in New York City and got to hear him speak. It showed me that the Pace name mattered and it lasted beyond the buildings in White Plains and classes you were taking—so that if you went somewhere and met someone who'd gone to Pace, that would be meaningful. I think that one of his focuses is to help build that feeling among alumni and current students." Roth applauds the dean for being open to new ideas, especially those related to finding jobs after graduation. And he is pleased that Dean Yassky's chief of staff, Janice Dean, has put together a useful how-to jobs guide on the energy and law sector, an area he is especially interested in.

Cayleigh Eckhardt, another third-year student, says she'd been too busy attending classes, editing the "Environmental Law Review" and organizing events for the program to take much notice of Pace Law School's new dean initially. But after she was involved in organizing an event with a stellar guest speaker, where attendance had been disappointingly low, she got an email from Dean Yassky that lifted her spirits.

"He wrote to all of the students about the importance of having community at the law school and how we could help build it by attending these events and staying informed about the different speakers and opportunities we have. I found it really inspiring. I thought, Wow, he just got here and he sees that! I actually wrote him back saying that I agreed, and that it was the first time I'd heard someone in charge at Pace Law discuss the importance of establishing more of a community on campus."

The Path Forward

Even with supportive alumni and a dedicated faculty, however, Yassky knows that the biggest challenge comes from rapid evolution in the marketplace. The legal economy still hasn't recovered fully from the financial crisis, and many new lawyers have faced great difficulty in landing entry-level jobs. In turn, that has led many college graduates to shy away from pursuing a law degree; nationwide, applications to law school have dropped by more than half since 2010.

"The challenges are real," says Yassky, "but so are the opportunities. The world of legal education is changing dramatically, and the schools that adapt best to these changes will move up in the pecking order."





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Yassky’s plan for Pace has three main components. First, he wants to build on the school’s curricular strengths, such as environmental law and real estate practice, and to develop new specialties in emerging areas like corporate compliance and digital security. “Environmental law is not just a passion for me,” he says. “It is a burgeoning area of practice, because every company today has to deal with environmental issues—they’re a component of practically every transaction.” Among Yassky’s first acts as Dean was to hire a new faculty member, Margot Pollans, to join the faculty’s existing, nationally renowned environmental scholars. “The time to hire is in a down market, when other schools are acting conservatively,” Yassky says. “That’s when you can nab a star like Margot.”

Next, Yassky is responding to the changing job market by redoubling Pace’s focus on practical, hands-on learning. “The legal marketplace of today doesn’t give employers the same level of ability to train people that they had certainly 20 and 30 but even 10 years ago,” observes the dean. “Legal employers, law firms and businesses that hire lawyers all need law school graduates to be able to deliver value day one,” he asserts. “We have to incorporate more lawyering experience into the curriculum, not simply train students to think like lawyers but act like lawyers as well.

“We do that a lot already at Pace, and have stood out from the beginning in our commitment to what educators would call skills education,” the dean points out. “It’s part of the philosophy of the place and is one of the things that drew me here. Now we have to take that even to the next level—incorporate it earlier and more fully into the curriculum.”

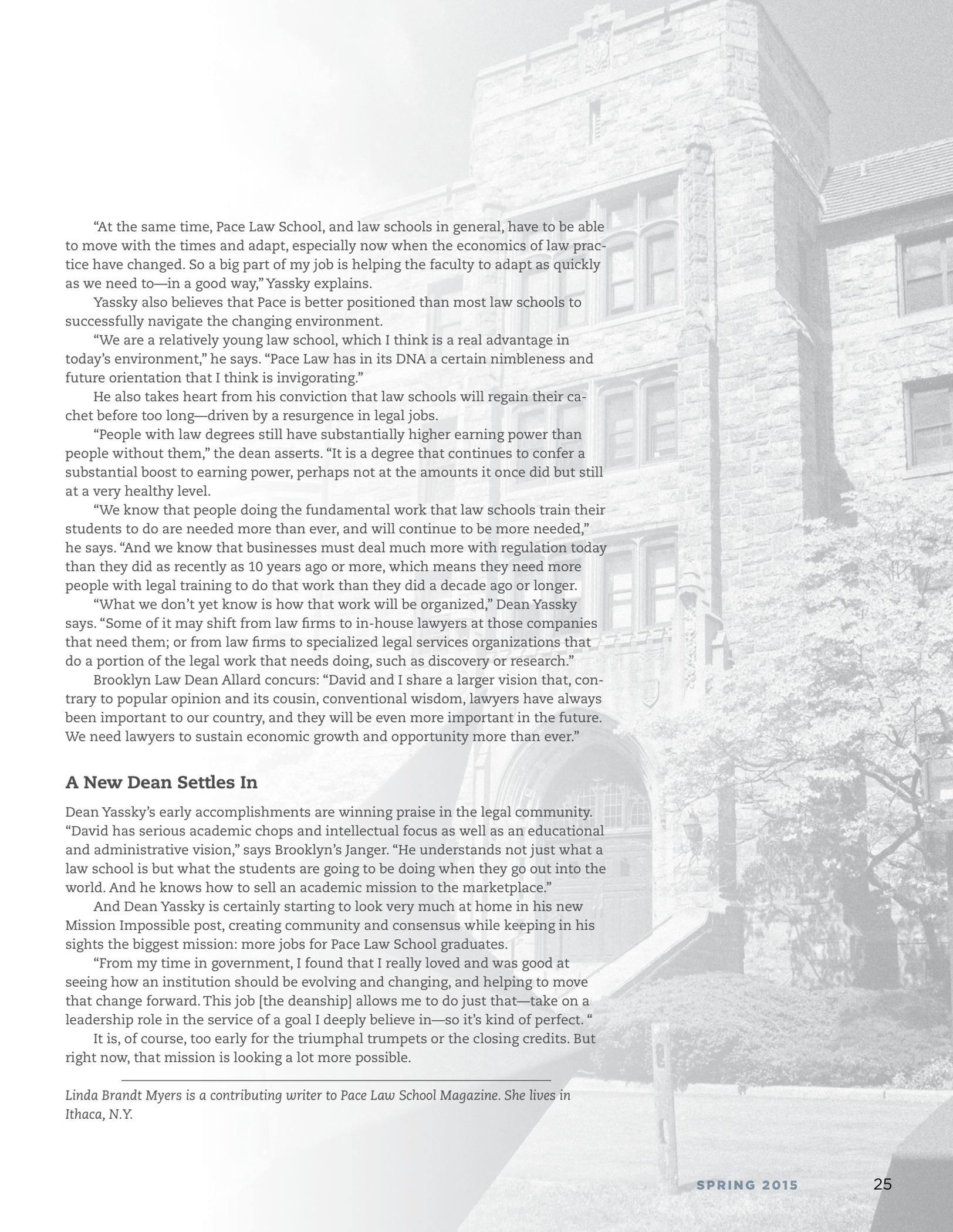
During his first year at Pace Law School, Dean Yassky has already introduced new supervised externship programs in family law and in real estate law, and he plans to expand a “semester-in-practice” program approved by the faculty last spring. “Five years from now,” he says “I would like to see every graduate leave Pace Law School with a set of skills suited to a particular area of legal practice gained through a significant practice experience each one of them had while in law school.”

The third prong of Yassky’s strategy is to keep tuition affordable, even as the nationwide drop in enrollment is pressuring law schools’ budgets. “It’s an enormous benefit to be part of Pace University, and to have its support to see us through this tough period in legal education,” he says, noting that “the University president, Steve Friedman, is a former Dean of the Law School and a passionate believer in legal education.” University funding, Yassky adds, “enables us to offer much more in scholarship dollars than we were able to do in the past.

“We understand that a legal education is a real investment of time and money for a young person,” Yassky says. “We take that seriously, and work hard to live up to the obligation to help our students earn a return on that investment.”

Why He’s Optimistic

Yassky acknowledges that achieving the progressive changes he envisions won’t be easy. “The institutional structure of a law school, and ours is no exception, makes change slow and difficult because academia is built to be insulated from change,” he notes. “There’s a thousand-year tradition of universities carrying forward the culture, despite the vicissitudes of politics and the economy of whatever day it is.



“At the same time, Pace Law School, and law schools in general, have to be able to move with the times and adapt, especially now when the economics of law practice have changed. So a big part of my job is helping the faculty to adapt as quickly as we need to—in a good way,” Yassky explains.

Yassky also believes that Pace is better positioned than most law schools to successfully navigate the changing environment.

“We are a relatively young law school, which I think is a real advantage in today’s environment,” he says. “Pace Law has in its DNA a certain nimbleness and future orientation that I think is invigorating.”

He also takes heart from his conviction that law schools will regain their cachet before too long—driven by a resurgence in legal jobs.

“People with law degrees still have substantially higher earning power than people without them,” the dean asserts. “It is a degree that continues to confer a substantial boost to earning power, perhaps not at the amounts it once did but still at a very healthy level.

“We know that people doing the fundamental work that law schools train their students to do are needed more than ever, and will continue to be more needed,” he says. “And we know that businesses must deal much more with regulation today than they did as recently as 10 years ago or more, which means they need more people with legal training to do that work than they did a decade ago or longer.

“What we don’t yet know is how that work will be organized,” Dean Yassky says. “Some of it may shift from law firms to in-house lawyers at those companies that need them; or from law firms to specialized legal services organizations that do a portion of the legal work that needs doing, such as discovery or research.”

Brooklyn Law Dean Allard concurs: “David and I share a larger vision that, contrary to popular opinion and its cousin, conventional wisdom, lawyers have always been important to our country, and they will be even more important in the future. We need lawyers to sustain economic growth and opportunity more than ever.”

A New Dean Settles In

Dean Yassky’s early accomplishments are winning praise in the legal community. “David has serious academic chops and intellectual focus as well as an educational and administrative vision,” says Brooklyn’s Janger. “He understands not just what a law school is but what the students are going to be doing when they go out into the world. And he knows how to sell an academic mission to the marketplace.”

And Dean Yassky is certainly starting to look very much at home in his new Mission Impossible post, creating community and consensus while keeping in his sights the biggest mission: more jobs for Pace Law School graduates.

“From my time in government, I found that I really loved and was good at seeing how an institution should be evolving and changing, and helping to move that change forward. This job [the deanship] allows me to do just that—take on a leadership role in the service of a goal I deeply believe in—so it’s kind of perfect. “

It is, of course, too early for the triumphal trumpets or the closing credits. But right now, that mission is looking a lot more possible.

Linda Brandt Myers is a contributing writer to Pace Law School Magazine. She lives in Ithaca, N.Y.