



Duquesne University's law school to get record \$50 million donation from renowned lawyer and alumnus Thomas R. Kline

University President Ken Gormley says the law school will be renamed for Mr. Kline, a 1978 graduate.



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One of the nation's top litigators who never forgot the doors Duquesne University opened for him is giving his alma mater's law school \$50 million — the largest gift commitment in the Pittsburgh university's 144-year history.

Thomas R. Kline, a 1978 Duquesne Law graduate, has made headlines over four-plus decades, not only for securing seven- and eight-figure jury verdicts — hundreds of them — but for the policy and practice reforms that those cases led to in the corporate, institutional and governmental worlds.

A Hazleton native, Mr. Kline — a founding partner with Kline & Specter, with offices in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and neighboring states — has pursued justice for plaintiffs in high-profile litigation stretching from the Jerry Sandusky sexual assault scandal at Penn State University to Amtrak crashes to a child sexual abuse case against the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

An \$8 billion punitive damages verdict in 2019 was the biggest in Pennsylvania history and in Mr. Kline's career. It was handed down by a Philadelphia jury against Johnson & Johnson and subsidiary Janssen Pharmaceuticals, the maker of Risperdal, an anti-psychotic drug, according to his firm's website.

At a noon gathering Wednesday in Duquesne's Power Center, university President Ken Gormley announced that the law school will be renamed for

Mr. Kline.

For his part, Mr. Kline, 74, sees the gift as coming full circle in a career that he said flows in large part from his years as a student on The Bluff.

“I want to make as big an impact as I can on future generations of lawyers in training in Pennsylvania,” Mr. Kline told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. “I’m grateful that Duquesne provided me with the foundation and the fundamentals. ... I want to help open those same doors to generations of men and women.”

Mr. Gormley spoke of the profound impact that the gift promises for a law school that, like Duquesne itself, was founded by Spiritan missionaries to move steel mill workers, immigrants and others in Pittsburgh toward a better life through education.

“This is a game-changer for us,” Mr. Gormley said.

“It is both touching and inspirational to me that this lawyer who is considered one of the best trial lawyers in the United States would decide, as his career has taken him to the very pinnacle of the profession, that he wants to name this particular law school and leave this legacy,” Mr. Gormley added.

“Immediately out of the gate, I plan that it will be used in part for some new scholarships for law students, particularly those who otherwise would not be able to afford the cost of a legal education,” he continued. “That’s very important to Tom.”

Other potential uses for the gift, to be delivered over multiple years, include faculty grants for excellence in teaching and scholarship, the law school’s noted Bar Preparation program, and new clinical offerings that benefit the community, officials said.

The \$50 million commitment comes amid the quiet phase of a university fundraising campaign expected to go public this fall at the 8,500-student university, officials said.

A previous gift of \$7.5 million to Duquesne’s law school from Mr. Kline allowed the launch the Thomas R. Kline Center for Judicial Education, which assists the courts in providing continuing judicial education to judges across the state.

And he previously gave \$50 million to Drexel University’s law school, which also carries his name.

Mr. Gormley said this latest gift to Duquesne is especially personal and profound, and not only because of the friendship he and Mr. Kline developed, talking about serious and light topics, sometimes meeting in Philadelphia at Fogo de Chão to see who could eat the most at the Brazilian steakhouse.

Rather, it’s something he recognizes in Mr. Kline, who rose from a humble childhood to extraordinary success but has always cared about ordinary people.

He’s also kept himself on the move — literally — saying he has walked 10 miles every day during the pandemic and telling a reporter to note that so it

might motivate others.

“Tom Kline’s story is really the story of this law school,” said Mr. Gormley. “He represents all of those qualities that have made Duquesne so distinctive.”

Mr. Kline grew up in Luzerne County, part of Pennsylvania’s anthracite coal region. The second in his family (after his sister) to attend college, he graduated from Albright College in 1969 with a political science degree.

He had law school offers in the Philadelphia area but put those aspirations on hold and taught social studies for six years in Freeland, a small borough part of the Hazleton Area School District, he said.

His late wife, Paula, then taught fifth-grade there. Her stepfather, who received an undergraduate education at Duquesne, suggested in the mid-1970s that Mr. Kline ought to consider its law school.

So he visited Pittsburgh and The Bluff to take a firsthand look at the campus and its law school. Though he had no appointment when he knocked on the door, he got in to see John Sciallo, then a professor and legendary figure in the law school.

The meeting moved him.

“He wanted to know all about me. He didn’t cover the law — he covered who I was,” Mr. Kline said. “It was the epitome of Duquesne. It’s everything that I loved about the people there.”

Mr. Kline received Duquesne Law’s Distinguished Student Award in 1978. In a few years time, he recalled, his law degree took him from a sixth-grade public school classroom to clerking for Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Thomas W. Pomeroy.

“There is nothing more important to me than the democratic values to which we adhere,” Mr. Kline said. “The fundamental core is the rule of law.”

He expressed a desire in particular to see others like him to have a similar opportunity, noting, “I’m very interested in first-generation law students.”

Other prominent Duquesne Law graduates offered testimonials to Mr. Kline, among them 1975 alumnus Max Baer, the chief justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court:

“The breadth of impact Tom Kline has had on the profession is immense. He is truly a leading light in the legal profession, not only in Pennsylvania but nationally. ... It is wonderful that law students and future generations of graduates at the Thomas R. Kline School of Law of Duquesne University will now carry with them that same commitment to the highest standards of excellence and ethics.”

Christine Donohue, a fellow state Supreme Court justice and 1980 Duquesne Law graduate, put it this way:

“As the daughter of a coal miner and as someone raised in Carbon County, Pennsylvania — not far from Hazleton where Tom Kline grew up — I have a special appreciation for Tom’s remarkable life story. Not only did he

emerge from humble origins to become one of the great trial lawyers in the nation, but he did so while exhibiting compassion and an unyielding commitment to achieving justice for all individuals, regardless of their station in life.”

State Senate Democratic leader Jay Costa, a 1989 Duquesne Law graduate and a member of the university board of directors, added: “Our system of laws and government function best when lawyers of great ability, like Tom Kline, insist on clarity in legal standards and alignment with the best interests of the people we represent.”

As of June 30, Duquesne’s endowment totaled \$584 million, of which approximately 42% was designated to support scholarships.

Other large gifts to the university include \$12.5 million from William Dietrich II, the prior \$7.5 million from Mr. Kline, and an anonymous \$3 million gift for the School of Osteopathic Medicine.

Duquesne’s law school was founded in 1911. This fall, there were 879 applicants for an entering class of 167. Just under half are women and a third from outside Pennsylvania; they range in age from 19 to 41, with 1 in 5 of them first-generation college students.

Mr. Kline, a big Bob Dylan fan who has been spotted courtside at many Philadelphia 76ers games over the years, likes to tell the story of the shop project he brought home as a boy — a metal funnel that was rolled, its soldering uneven and messy — and the reaction from his father, a believer in education.

“You’re going to have to make your living with your head and not your hands,” his father told him.

So Tom Kline did just that — and has come to appreciate something about the law and the plaintiffs he has represented, among them victim No. 5 in the Sandusky case.

“He and I still keep in touch,” Mr. Kline said. “Your clients can actually be your friends.”

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