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Drexel Law gets \$50M gift, the largest ever for the university

Drexel University School of Law will be renamed the Thomas R. Kline School of Law in honor of a \$50 million donation — the largest single gift in the university's 123-year history — from the Philadelphia plaintiffs personal injury litigator.

The donation includes a large bequest, plus the former Beneficial Bank building at 12th and Chestnut streets that will house the Thomas R. Kline Institute of Trial Advocacy of the Kline School of Law. Drexel hopes the new trial advocacy program, which includes programming for law students and an LLM program for practicing litigators, will enhance the 8-year-old law school's reputation in what has become an exceptionally challenging legal education market in the post-recession world.

"The gift will allow Drexel to attract the best students and faculty and give the school a chance to distinguish itself in what has become very competitive market," Kline said.

In 2013, Kline bought the 24,000-square-foot building, which was designed by Horace Trumbauer and was constructed about 80 years ago for Beneficial Bank. It boasts ornate high ceilings and other fine detailing from another era and still retains the Beneficial board room but needs a complete renovation. After it had been unoccupied for four years, Beneficial sold the building in 2005 when it relocated its headquarters to the Penn Mutual building. (Beneficial is now based at 1818 Market St.).

Kline had worked across the street from the building for 15 years and said he "couldn't resist" buying it. It was going to be used as a pool hall but Kline had a higher purpose in mind for it. He hopes it's open for students by 2016.

Drexel officials believe the trial advocacy institute will dramatically change the entire range of the law school's activities — advancing courtroom simulation for the juris doctor program and co-curricular programming and will enhance faculty interaction with students who undertake advocacy-based co-ops and clinical work. Additionally, it will support the development of post-graduate LLM and continuing legal education trial and appellate advocacy programs.

Drexel President John Fry said the remaining portion of Kline's gift will be divided into three pools.

General-operating fund such as faculty, financial aid (including one scholarship each year that Kline will fund) and the use of technology in law.

Renovations of 1200 Chestnut, for which Drexel has already hired an architect.

Enhancements to curriculum and other programs.

Kline is actually the second person to have Drexel's law school named after him. But last December, five years after his \$15 million donation led the school to name its fledgling law school in his honor, the university announced that Drexel alum and philanthropist Earle Mack had "graciously stepped aside as naming benefactor of Drexel's law school. This de-

cision will clear the way for us to seek additional benefactors to further advance the school in what has become a very challenging legal education climate.”

So the school received a much larger donation, which is not only the largest gift the university has ever received but also the fourth largest gift ever received by any U.S. law school behind University of Arizona (\$130 million in 1999), Ave Maria School of Law (\$100 million in 1999) and Chapman University (\$55 million in 2013), according to Drexel officials.

As a basis of comparison, Kline’s mentor and former boss, James Beasley Sr., donated \$20 million in 1998 to have Temple University rename its law school in his honor. Beasley’s generosity was not lost on Kline.

“I was in awe of Jim Beasley and the fact that he made that donation, to his alma mater no less, and thought it was a wonderful tribute by the university to rename the school,” Kline said. “So yes, it was in my mind.”

Temple has one of the top trial advocacy programs in the country. Kline used to teach there. But he still sees trial advocacy as an underserved need and with Drexel’s program based just a few blocks from where many Philadelphia lawyers work in Center City, it could be an attractive option.

Drexel Law’s main building will remain on Market Street between 33rd and 34th streets. Dean Roger Dennis said the 8-year-old building, the law school’s home since four months into its first year, is a tight fit “but we make it work.” The school’s law library is located in a connected building but trial practice classes are conducted in rooms not designed for that purpose. So the new space at 1200 Chestnut will create not just more space but better quality space designed for specialty classes.

When asked if the school considered using the money to construct a new main law school building, Kline noted that he wanted the 1200 Chestnut building to be dedicated toward trial advocacy.

Dennis said there are no plans to increase the size of the law school’s student population. Drexel Law opened in September 2006 with 167 students in its first class and hoped to have even larger classes. But then the recession hit and — and like virtually every other law school in the country — Drexel has cut back on class sizes as job opportunities and applications have shrunk drastically. (Dennis said the goal is about 135 students per class as the number of law school applicants nationwide has fallen from about 100,000 in 2004 to 54,000 this fall.

In addition to the trial advocacy program, Drexel Law is also starting an LLM program for foreign law students seeking an education on U.S. law — similar to the programs already offered at Temple and University of Pennsylvania Law School — and a master’s in corporate compliance designed for nonlawyer students that will be taught largely online. Those programs are geared to help Drexel Law meet its fiscal goals while offering more educational value — something that has become more common as law schools deal with fewer students.

Kline, 67, is chair of the law school’s board of advisers and a member of the university’s board of trustees. Along with longtime colleague Shanin Specter, Kline is a co-founder and partner at Kline & Specter, perhaps the city’s best-known plaintiffs personal injury firm. He is a native of Hazleton, Pa., who graduated from Albright College, earned a master’s degree and a Ph.D. in American history from Lehigh University and Duquesne University School of Law. He taught sixth grade for a time before decided to attend law school. After a judicial clerkship, he joined the Beasley Firm in 1980, where he worked for legendary trial lawyer James Beasley Sr. He and Specter left in 1995 to start their own firm and soon built up the most powerful plaintiffs firm in the city, with more than 30 lawyers.

Kline has handled some of the biggest personal injury cases in the region, if not the whole country. He was the lead plaintiffs lawyer in the Vioxx litigation which resulted in a \$4.85 billion settlement paid by Merck & Co. He secured a \$51 million verdict against SEPTA on behalf of a boy whose foot was torn off in a subway escalator. And he represented 11 of

the 12 plaintiffs in settlements totaling \$40.5 million in a case that involved a June 2001 fire at a Hatboro apartment building that killed six and injured six mostly elderly residents. He also represented a victim in the Jerry Sandusky child sex abuse civil case.