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Beyond law & order



Blake Nakamura '87, right, created the first CSUEB scholarship for criminal justice administration students in honor of his father, Eiichi, and mother, Marion Nakamura (not pictured).

PHOTO JESSE CANTLEY

Blake Nakamura '87 makes a case for CSUEB students to pursue criminal justice careers

BY SARAH STANEK

It's hard to imagine many settings more removed from a criminal courtroom than the basement of the University Union at CSUEB, but the instant Blake Nakamura '87 steps up to the podium, it's easy to chart how he rose through the legal ranks.

He's clearly comfortable speaking to a group, after years as a prosecutor and in private practice. But it's also obvious that he is enjoying this occasion to speak so personally to an audience at a crossroads he's familiar with — new graduates looking at possible career paths ahead.

The chief deputy in the Salt Lake County (Utah) District Attorney's office and CSUEB alumnus served as guest of honor at the graduation reception for the Department of Criminal Justice Administration in 2012. His visit brought him face-to-face with the faculty, students and alumni who graced the pages of *Cal State East Bay Magazine* in spring 2011, which chronicled the University's modern approach to criminal justice education.

The magazine issue, with the cover headline "Beyond CSI: CSUEB trains future law, order and forensic science pros," had immediately hooked Nakamura's attention, inspiring him to reconnect with his alma mater to see how he could help the next generation of criminal justice professionals. The unsurprising answer: A lot.

"Blake is a role model, showing that you can be compassionate, be ethical, care about the community while still wanting justice," says Silvina Ituarte, the department chair.

As the evening's keynote speaker, Nakamura offered cheerful and witty advice, likening the future of criminal justice to the gates of Disneyland and telling the Class of 2012 to "enjoy the rides." But he tempered his words with caution, drawing from years of experience on the prosecution and defense side of the justice system: "Don't let the work and the thrill of the hunt take you away from the principles." With humility, he added: "You didn't get here alone."

That last sentiment also led to the creation of the first scholarship for criminal justice administration students at CSUEB, the Eiichi and Marion Nakamura Award, named for his parents. Nakamura and Ituarte presented the first award to Ana Jimenez, a criminal justice major in the corrections option.

Jimenez also credits her parents with putting her on the path to success. Growing up in a rough neighborhood, they emphasized the importance of education, which helped her avoid violence and drugs — and sparked an interest in justice, particularly "restorative" programs that focus on meeting the needs of victims as well as offenders, rather than punishment. With her degree, she says, "I can make a difference by reinforcing the goals (many) restorative programs have forgotten."

In addition to corrections and social services, many students go on to pursue careers in law enforcement, like alumna Diane Urban '86, the Hayward police chief, or dozens of graduates working with state, local and federal agencies. But Nakamura is excited to see new paths opening for today's students, with software development, virtual training and community services — and yes, CSI lab tech jobs, too — expanding the notion of a criminal justice career. "There's no question the traditional roles remain, but you don't have to limit yourself to that," he said.

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From Nakamura's perspective, CSUEB is an ideal launch pad. "This is a first class education," he says, emphasizing that the instruction he got as an undergraduate prepared him to do more than simply get a job, it put him in a position to succeed in the competitive legal world.

And how did this California native end up in Salt Lake City? His career began while still a student at then-Cal State Hayward, working in the Alameda County Public Defenders Office as an investigator. When he decided to attend law school, he chose to enroll at the University of Utah, then remained in the state where he ultimately made his career. Nakamura built a reputation through high profile cases prosecuting special victims crime, like domestic abuse and sexual assault, from 1993 to 1999 and representing private clients in his own practice for another 10 years after that. Sim Gill, the current D.A. for Salt Lake County, personally asked Nakamura to join his administration in 2011.

Utah's terrain had been a huge draw when he applied for law school, Nakamura is quick to admit, with plenty of snow for winter ski trips and lakes for fishing. But it proved an ideal location for work, too, since opportunities for weekend escapes are extremely important to keeping one's sanity in a demanding career like the law, he points out.

It's not only the workload, though that's certainly substantial, he says. Working as a prosecutor is emotionally intense. Over the years, he has seen abuse, violence and lives destroyed, and he's had to investigate them in detail. "Criminal justice is full of human stories and relationships. At its essence, it captures the best and worst of humanity," he told the students.

And while he says there's no other way to pursue justice, those who work in the field need to recognize the challenges and "bring some of you home at the end of the day." That's one of the many reasons support from his family has been so critical to his success, he says, and why he named the scholarship for his parents, who supported him unconditionally.

"Through me, they have contributed so much to the field of criminal justice," he says. "They're most responsible for what I've given to society."

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