

PRESS RELEASE

Baker Donelson plants seeds for law school fundraising

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The Cecil Humphreys Law School at the University of Memphis needed a jump-start on its fundraising campaign for its new Downtown campus.

People in business and those with private wealth wanted to see the legal community step up before they committed money to the effort to turn the post office building on Front Street into a new home for the law school, recalled James Smoot, dean of the law school.

"The most important thing they thought we could do was get donations from prominent law firms," he said.

Up stepped Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, perhaps Memphis' most prominent law firm.

Molding together money from the firm, donations from its lawyers who are U of M alums, and cash from a friend of the firm who didn't want to be named, Baker Donelson jump-started the campaign with a \$300,000 pledge.

"They came through in a major way," Smoot said.

Their fellow lawyers followed -- virtually all the major law firms in Memphis "are helping us in significant ways," Smoot said.

The folks at Baker Donelson were glad to help, said Jerry Stauffer, president and chief operating officer.

"Dean Smoot contacted us, shared his vision of what U of M could do with a Downtown school, and we got pretty excited," Stauffer said.

"Relocating the law school (from the main campus) near the legal center of the city will allow the students greater access to legal professionals and will help reinforce their understanding of our legal system," Stauffer said. And that should improve recruiting, he said.

Also, Baker Donelson is committed to Downtown -- the law firm just renewed its lease on offices in the First Tennessee Bank building for 15 years.

Plus, the school agreed to name a classroom in honor of Lewis Donelson III, a founder of the firm.

And the firm, which has 90 attorneys in Memphis, 450 overall, includes 40 to 50 U of M Law School grads, Stauffer said.

"With our prominent position in the legal community, we thought it was important to make a real statement," he said.

That put the school on the way to raising the \$6 million needed to cover the expenses that the \$42 million from the state of Tennessee didn't take care of, such as the cost of acquiring the property, Smoot said.

Since then, other law firms and foundations have contributed \$5 million to the effort.

Now, the fundraisers have added another \$6 million to the goal to bankroll additional scholarships, student activities such as moot court teams, attracting and retaining top-quality professors and boosting the law school's endowment, Smoot said.

As for the building, work is expected to began at the end of the year.

"We're scheduled to start classes there in August of 2009," Smoot said.

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