

# SMU Dedman

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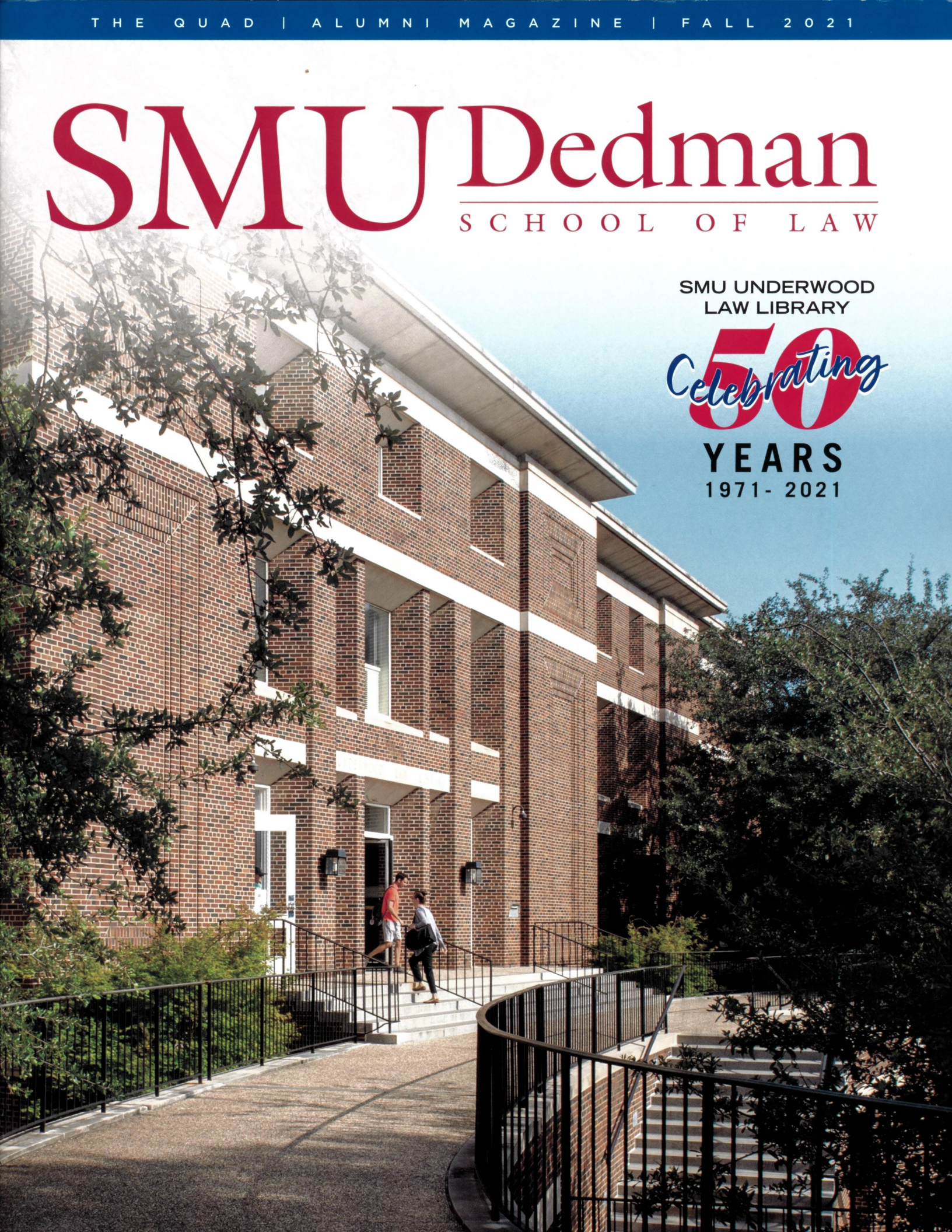
SCHOOL OF LAW

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*Celebrating*

**YEARS**

1971 - 2021



## FIRST ANNIVERSARY

## First Amendment Clinic Gets to Work

**Thomas S. Leatherbury**

Director of the First Amendment Clinic and Adjunct Clinical Professor of Law



Nearly a year ago we set out to create a much needed First Amendment Clinic at SMU Dedman School of Law. Our mission:

to vindicate and advance the First Amendment rights of speech, press, petition, and assembly and give our students practical litigation and client-counseling experience that would transform them from observers to advocates for these First Amendment values.

OUR MISSION: TO VINDICATE AND ADVANCE  
THE FIRST AMENDMENT RIGHTS OF SPEECH, PRESS,  
PETITION, AND ASSEMBLY

We're about to celebrate our first anniversary in August – a perfect time to take stock of our launch so we can make the next year even better.

One Fifth Circuit argument, one successful summary judgment argument, five moot courts, one successful federal lawsuit, five amicus briefs, and many research memoranda and client consultations later, we're off to a great start.

This seems to answer one of Dean Jennifer Collins' pre-launch questions in the fall of 2019: "Will there be enough work?" One year in, the answer is a resounding "yes."

Starting a new law school clinic is challenging. Leadership must develop a syllabus, obtain curriculum committee approval, network, recruit students, source matters, hire a Clinic Fellow – in addition to numerous other details. The pandemic and the hybrid learning model necessary to navigate it only added to the challenges as we got underway.

Thanks to the Stanton Foundation's generous gift, the hard work of the students and Clinic Fellow Michael Shapiro, we had a busy, productive and rewarding year. This was facilitated by the welcoming, "can-do" attitude of Dean Collins and the SMU Law School faculty and staff, the steady stream of work that came from old and new clients, old and new colleagues in the national and Texas media bars, and other clinic directors from across the country.

Even before we had students, we fielded Open Meetings Act and Texas Public Information Act inquiries that came through the Law School Clinics' award-winning COVID-19 Helpline and collaborated on a Texas Supreme Court amicus brief in a defamation case.

In the fall, we represented Texas Public Radio in a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit against

the U.S. Department of Agriculture for documents about a COVID-19 relief program alleged to have been mismanaged. The students conferred with the client and with opposing counsel, drafted the complaint, and got to experience the satisfying feeling of getting the information your client needs so it can continue reporting on issues of public importance. We began collaborating with The Marshall Project and filed a Texas Public Information Act lawsuit for media reports generated by the Harris County District Attorney's Office. In the spring, one of our students argued the summary judgment motion that she and her classmates had drafted, and, on our last day of class, we got the Judge's order granting our motion. Our client got the documents it had requested about a month later.

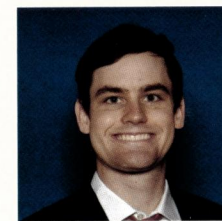
*Thomas S. Leatherbury is Director of the First Amendment Clinic and Adjunct Clinical Professor of Law at the SMU Dallas Dedman School of Law, and a partner at the law firm of Vinson & Elkins LLP.*

What our  
students  
are saying...

**Ellen Yost**

Class of 2021

"Immediately, within the first two weeks in the Clinic, I had the opportunity to research and draft a key section of an amicus brief submitted to the Texas Supreme Court, and to refine my work product with help from some of the most experienced First Amendment lawyers in the state."

**West Bakke**

Class of 2021

"The Clinic exposed me to a wide variety of work – I worked on everything from research memos to motions for summary judgment to appellate briefs. I even received the opportunity to present oral argument in federal appellate court. The advocacy skills I developed at the Clinic will serve me well in my future career as a litigator."

**Heather Sims**

Class of 2021

"The First Amendment Clinic was the most educational and rewarding experience I had at SMU Law. The Clinic gave me not only the practical skills and the confidence necessary to being an effective advocate, but also the opportunity to use this training to win a case for a client."