Blasi honored at Columbia Law School

Professor Vincent Blasi has been chosen to be the first professor in residence in the Samuel Rubin Program for the Advancement of Liberty and Equality through Law at Columbia University Law School. Lecturers and occasional visiting professors, chosen from among noted legal professionals, teachers, and public figures whose careers demonstrate commitment to social justice and human rights, will be invited to Columbia under the auspices of the new program.

Professor Blasi, a specialist on the First Amendment and civil liberties, has been at the Michigan Law School since 1970. He has recently finished editing a book, The Burger Court: A Critical Assessment, which will be published by Yale University Press. Professor Blasi has written several scholarly articles on the First Amendment, most notably a study of the checking value in First Amendment theory for which he was chosen by the American Bar Foundation to write the Samuel Pool Weaver Essay in Constitutional Law, an honor which has been accorded to only three other scholars in the last five years.

At a symposium sponsored by the University of Minnesota to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark case of Near v. Minnesota, Professor Blasi was one of the five specialists on the First Amendment invited to deliver a paper. In addition to his scholarly articles on such topics as journalistic privilege, on the Bakke case, on prior restraint, and on the “rootless activism” of the Burger Court, Blasi has written on journalism and the law for national publications like The Nation. He is probably most popularly known for his witty and insightful weekly commentary on current legal issues, “Law in the News,” which was broadcast on National Public Radio from 1972 to 1981.

While Professor Blasi will hold the only Rubin Professorship this year, civil rights leader Vernon Jordan and Anthony Lewis, an editorial columnist for the New York Times and author of Gideon’s Trumpet, have been invited to visit and lecture as Rubin Fellows. The first such Rubin Fellow, who spent a week at Columbia last fall, was Judge J. Skelly Wright of the United States Court of Appeals, D.C. Circuit.

The program of visiting professorships and lectures was established by the Samuel Rubin Foundation to advance the ideals of its late founder. Mr. Rubin, who established Faberge, Inc., was, according to the Foundation, “sensitive throughout his life to the needs and rights of the poor and defenseless and dedicated to concern for universal human rights and the peaceful resolution of economic and social conflict.”

To that end, Mr. Rubin supported a wide variety of causes and institutions from Harlem’s Sydenham Hospital to the Journal of Transnational Law. The Foundation sees the new program as an expression of Mr. Rubin’s cognizance of “the importance of free expression and the right to dissent in a functioning democracy” and of his skepticism “about governmental justifications for encroachments on the Bill of Rights.”

For Professor Blasi, a side benefit of his year as Samuel Rubin Visiting Professor of Law will be easy access to the New York music scene. He and his wife Nancy Gilmartin, who is a musician, frequently attend concerts in New York. “This visit,” he says, “will save us a lot of train fares.” A patron of the arts as well as of social causes, Mr. Rubin would surely be pleased at the combination of enthusiasm for music and insight into civil rights issues which Blasi will bring to Columbia this year. Mr. Rubin once provided the late Leopold Stokowski with a grant to establish the American Symphony Orchestra, with the proviso that he make a special effort to recruit black and female musicians.