Cyril H. Wecht, MD, ’62, the School of Law’s first physician graduate, may be the country’s most famous coroner since “Quincy.”

The coroner of Allegheny County (Pennsylvania), Wecht is also the director of forensic pathology at St. Francis Central Hospital in Pittsburgh; clinical professor at the University of Pittsburgh schools of medicine, dental medicine, and graduate school of public health; and adjunct professor at Duquesne University schools of law, pharmacy and health sciences.

And how did he become the country’s most well-known coroner with all this to keep him busy in his native Pittsburgh? Throughout his career, he has served as a professional consultant in some of the country’s most high-profile legal cases, including the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, and Rev. Martin Luther King; the death of Elvis Presley; the O.J. Simpson case; and the JonBenet Ramsey case. These cases, as well as those involving Mary Jo Kopechne, Sunny von Bulow, Jean Harris, Dr. Jeffrey McDonald, the Waco Branch Davidian fire, Vincent Foster and others are discussed from Wecht’s perspective and professional involvement in his books, Cause of Death, Grave Secrets, and Who Killed JonBenet Ramsey? Through his medical and legal background, Wecht has been able to formulate esteemed opinions on these controversial cases.

The only child of immigrants (his father from Lithuania and mother from Russia), Wecht embodies the standard work ethic of his generation. In college, as is typical with the rest of his life, he was very active and involved. “I was a Big Man on Campus, involved in student government, my fraternity; everyone assumed I was pre-law.” As a sophomore, with assumptions that he was a law student, he wrote to the Medical Association to inquire about a joint medical/legal degree.

In response, he was invited to the first AMA/ABA Biannual Conference in New York City. “It was all over my head,” Wecht exclaims, but a conference speaker met with him for 15 to 20 minutes and Wecht decided “then and there that I would go to law school.”

The negative feedback he encountered: “You can’t serve two masters.” “Those are two separate disciplines.” “You’ll never be considered a doctor or a lawyer,” of course did not deter him. Years later his books, with reviews touting Wecht as “a leading forensic
expert,” send a resounding proclamation to follow one’s calling.

His calling is forensic pathology, the most integrated medical field that interfaces with law, explains Wecht. During his residency at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pa., he was allowed to attend the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. In 1959, with one year of law school remaining, he was sent to the U.S. Air Force Hospital, Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Ala., as associate pathologist. Under the Berry Program, his compulsory military service allowed him to gain credit for two years of medical school plus a residency.

Baltimore held the answer for his two remaining years of education: he finished his medical training as a research fellow in forensic pathology and associate pathologist, Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, while attending evening classes at the School of Law. That wasn’t all he accomplished. While working evenings as a pathologist at North Charles General Hospital, he found time to court and marry his girlfriend from the Air Force base, a Norway native named Sigrid. 1962 was a productive year.

Pittsburgh was his home and upon his return, his career took off. He simultaneously held positions as acting chief and pathologist in various hospitals while teaching as a clinical instructor in medicine and pathology, a lecturer in legal medicine and a research professor of law for various universities. Though most of his experience is in forensic pathology, his interests and legal training have led him down the path toward bioethical questions of human research and experimentation, medical malpractice and medical/legal consultation.

Wecht’s interests, passions and expertise presented yet another avenue for exploration. Wecht has authored more than 420 professional publications, is on the editorial board of more than 20 national and international medical-legal and forensic scientific publications and editor of 35 books. He has organized and conducted postgraduate medical-legal seminars in more than 50 countries in his capacity as director of the Pittsburgh Institute of Legal Medicine.

The emphasis Wecht has placed on legal medicine is no accident. He recognized from his own education where the strong points and the weak points lie. “For centuries, medical schools throughout the country have included legal coursework for doctors to understand the need for legal expertise. Most regretfully, in this country, there are still no courses offered medical students that accentuate the legal aspects of medicine.”

The same is not true for legal education. At the University of Maryland School of Law, Dean Karen H. Rothenberg’s own interest and direction has spurred the School’s Law and Health Care program. Similarly, it is another of Wecht’s callings to fill a need and develop a program at Duquesne University in forensic science and law. The program, which was two years in the making, will be formally approved at the end of October with a campus kick off and a January 2001 enrollment date. The Cyril H. Wecht Institute of Forensic Science and Law offers two major areas of endeavors: a certificate program that is part of the law school and a master’s in forensic science, offering 12 to 15 credit hours from the law school, and special, newly created courses in legal medicine and forensic science. Various graduate school involvement includes the nursing school, school of pharmacology and toxicology, among others.

James Zimmerly, MD, ’69 and Dean Rothenberg, both of whom are held in highest esteem by Wecht, have been invited to be members of the Advisory Board for Duquesne University’s new Institute of Forensic Science and Law.

The fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree where Wecht’s family is concerned. He, his wife and eldest son have a family firm, the Wecht Law Firm. His second son is a neurosurgeon and third son, Benjamin, a writer who has worked with Wecht on his books, Cause of Death and Grave Secrets. Ingrid, his daughter, is an OB/GYN. Wecht and his wife enjoy seven grandchildren, as the entire family resides in Pittsburgh.