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International Interns Work in Geneva

After her first year at UB Law, Suzanne Sullivan spent the summer of ’89 in Geneva, Switzerland, as an intern at the World Health Organization (WHO), where she learned that the health threat posed by AIDS has international dimensions that are truly alarming.

Liz Calvo, another first-year law student, also spent the summer as an intern in Geneva. Her assignment was the International Labor Organization (ILO), where she encountered the problems of native peoples who are fighting to maintain their cultural identities.

Third-year student Nan Clingman spent last summer in Geneva as an intern at the Henri Dunant Institute, the research arm of the International Committee of the Red Cross. There she engaged in a research project for the United Nations on practices and approaches to penology.

These law students were among the beneficiaries of a one-year planning grant given to the Law School by the Ford Foundation to develop an innovative international public service program for students. The program was planned and proposed to Ford by law Professor Virginia A. Leary. An official of the International Labor Organization in Geneva prior to teaching at the Law School, Leary is an expert in the field of international law. Claude E. Welch, Distinguished Service Professor in the political science department, served as project co-director.

The purpose of the program is to provide American students with an opportunity for a supervised internship in international organizations. Leary accompanied the group to Geneva, made the placement arrangements and organized a seminar that was attended by the law students and other student interns in Geneva.

Another second-year student, Craig Mokhiber, also interned with the UN in Geneva, the recipient of a Law School-funded Public-Interest Fellowship. The award gave him the opportunity to pursue his interests in human rights law. Mokhiber studied the ways nations employ preventive detention and other responses to “states of emergency.” Two other law students, Jane Hanny and Jennifer Krieger, also participated in the Switzerland program.

The positive experiences of these students underscored the growing reputation of UB Law School’s international law programs. According to Leary, the international internships and the public interest fellowships are forerunners of even broader international programs with a legal orientation. The Law School will be requesting a major grant from the Ford Foundation to institutionalize the program, Leary reported. She and Professor Welch plan to expand the program by developing a consortium with other law schools interested in internship programs in Geneva.

Speaking at a Law School forum this fall, Sullivan said she was moved by the gaps in health care that doomed large numbers of people across the world to the equivalent of little or no health care. Working with the World Health Organization, she began with a natural inclination toward health-care advocacy.

Her Geneva experience strengthened that, she explained. “Many of us made broad assumptions about the worldwide emphasis on health and safety — and too often, these assumptions aren’t valid,” Sullivan explained. The AIDS crisis, she said, is one instance where the need for recognition and treatment is truly international in scope.

Indigenous peoples have frequently been displaced by conquest and other means throughout the ages, but their desires for self-determination and for maintaining their identities remain strong. Calvo said that her internship at the ILO brought her face-to-face with their efforts to secure an amendment to an international agreement that would identify them as “peoples” rather than “populations.”

The significance of the change is more than semantic, she said. It involves indigenous self-identity. And that brings with it the prospect of political conflicts. Calvo worked with ILO delegates trying to resolve those conflicts.

Clingman, who had worked for the American Red Cross for seven years before enrolling in law school, has been active in the International Law Society, Amnesty International and the UB Graduate Group on Human Rights. She found that her research didn’t end when she returned from Geneva. Last fall, she said, she was still completing her report on penology practices for the Henri Dunant Institute.

“Our experience was excellent and that bodes well in terms of future program development,” said Leary.