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## Doing Good in Washington: Six Young Alumni Working in the Public Interest

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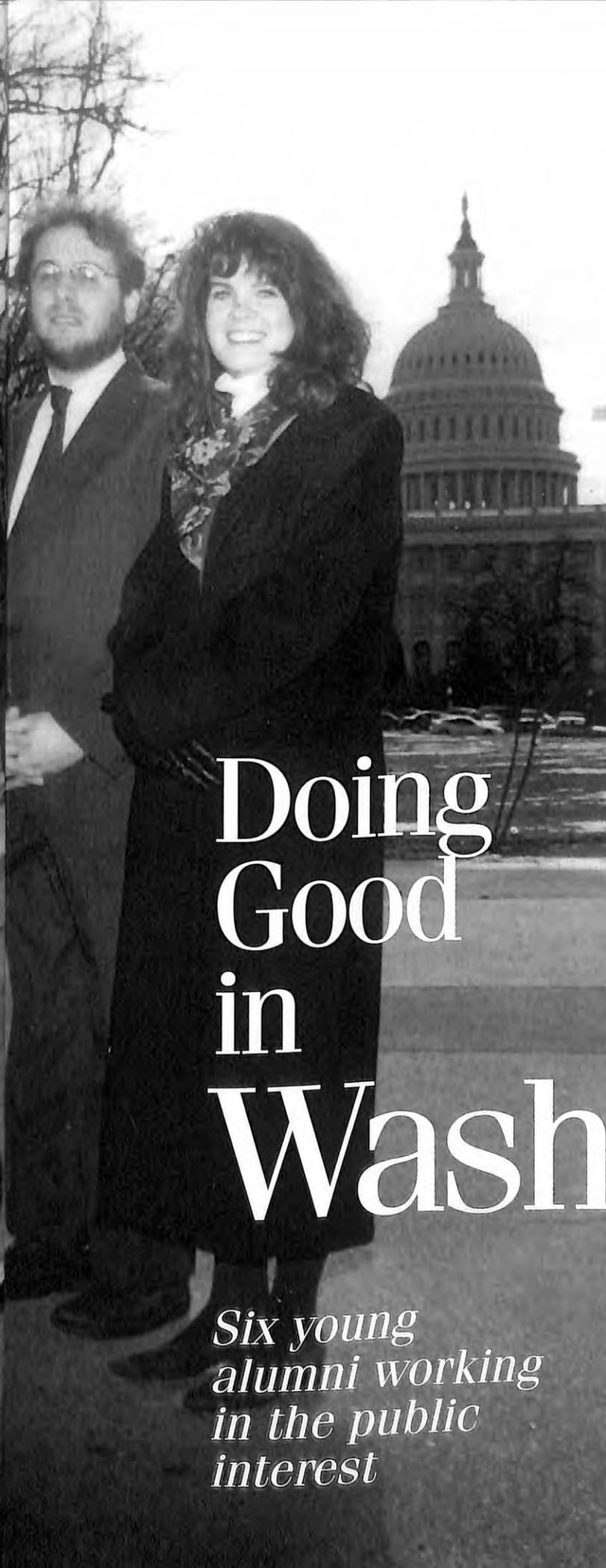
UB LAW

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*Left to right: K. Jill Barr '93, Sara Nichols '88, Bill Magavern '88 (Sara and Bill are married; their son Nicholas is between them), Joseph Belluck '94, and Betsy A. Bannigan Wheeler '90. Below: Kathleen Welch '91 with Ralph Nader*





# Doing Good in Washington

*Six young alumni working in the public interest*

*This isn't an ideal time to work as a progressive activist. As the Republican majority presses its advantage in Congress and Republican candidates line up for their shot at the presidency, public-interest advocates often find their work an eternally uphill battle.*

*But that makes the victories, when they come, all the sweeter.*

*UB Law Forum spoke with a half-dozen recent alumnae who are working in public-interest positions in the nation's capital. They talked of frustration and reward, challenge and inspiration.*

*They also pointed to a growing reputation in the Washington public-policy community for UB Law School graduates, saying the school has become known as a place that produces lawyers well-qualified to do public-interest work.*

*Here's what else they had to say.*

## **Joseph Belluck '94;** **Congress Watch**

**C**ongress Watch is a unit of Public Citizen, the consumer advocacy group founded by Ralph Nader in the early 1970s. Its mission is to monitor, influence and sometimes initiate legislation that improves consumers' health and safety.

Joseph Belluck, who joined Congress Watch in January, works on one area of that broad mandate: civil justice reform. "My role," he says, "is to protect the rights of injured people to have their day in court, to prevent tort reform or product liability reform or securities litigation reform. There's a move afoot here in Washington and in lots of states to cut off people's access to the courts."

For example, he says, tort reform bills before Congress would limit the time in which a person injured by a faulty product could sue; would limit clients' contingency fee arrangements with

lawyers, discouraging lawsuits; and would limit awards for punitive damages. "It costs so much money to bring these cases," he says, "if you limit the amount of damages they can get it often makes the cases financially impossible to bring. Because a lawyer won't take them. ... Clearly these are things that are aimed at making it harder for people to get into court."

Belluck also works on other legislation, in

such areas as medical malpractice and securities fraud. And he does "a lot of media" — "I spend a lot of time giving interviews to the press for a quote here, a quote there; but more importantly to develop a core of interested reporters whom you have an ongoing relationship with that you can give story ideas to."

**Bill Magavern '88:**

***Critical Mass Energy Project***

**B**ill Magavern directs the Critical Mass Energy Project, another Public Citizen effort. He came to the project three years ago from the U.S. Public Interest Research Group. He is married to Sara Nichols.

The Critical Mass group, he says, is "a strong critic of the nuclear power industry and its attempts to dump its radioactive waste in dangerous ways. And we are strong supporters of using energy more efficiently and of developing cleaner, safer, renewable sources of energy, such as solar and wind power."

The work, Magavern says, involves researching and publishing detailed reports on energy issues; writing op-ed pieces for newspapers; and working with grass-roots organizations nationwide to provide information and assistance "when they need help navigating the rather treacherous pathways of Capitol Hill." He, too, has testified a number of times before congressional committees.

"I would define myself as a public policy advocate as opposed to a legal advocate," he says. "Whether it's in Congress or meeting with a White House or Department of Energy official, or going on a radio show, or writing an op-ed or speaking to a citizens group, what I'm doing is advocating the environmental point of view."

With the price of energy so low, Magavern says, it's difficult to raise interest in energy issues nowadays. "On the other hand, when you have a community that's very affected, you get a very intense outpouring of opin-

ion, for example when a community is affected by the threat of a radioactive waste dump. When something like that happens it very quickly brings home to people the problem with our energy policy."

The job, he says, is "continually challenging and interesting. I meet and work with a lot of great people, and we're trying to make the world a better place for my son (born early this year).

"If anybody had told me when I was in law school that this is what I would be doing after law school, I would have said: 'Great. That's exactly what I've wanted to do.' And if anything it's been better than I expected."

**Betsy A. Bannigan Wheeler '90:**

***Handgun Control Inc.***

**B**etsy Bannigan Wheeler joined Handgun Control Inc. — the gun-control organization chaired by Sarah Brady, wife of Reagan press secretary Jim Brady — in March 1994. Previously, she worked as a legislative assistant to U.S. Rep. John LaFalce, D-Tonawanda, on a number of issues including gun control.

"I was fascinated with politics and the whole legislative process," Wheeler says, "and what better place to go for that than D.C.?"

Handgun Control, she says, is "working to enact a sensible, comprehensive gun policy for the nation." And she's quick to point out: "We're not a gun-banning organization. The National Rifle Association likes to portray us as gun-grabbers, but that is not our policy at all. If you want to have a gun for hunting or sport, if you think you need a gun in your home for self-defense — we certainly wouldn't encourage it, but we're not out to absolutely ban all guns."

What they are out to do is reduce gun violence. The lobby has won two major victories in recent years with passage of the Brady Law — requiring a five-day waiting period on gun purchases and a background check — and

the recent congressional ban on military-style assault weapons.

The Brady Law passed before she came to Handgun Control, so she says her most exciting moment came with the assault weapon ban, which passed on a vote of 216 to 214. "It's so rare to get a vote in Congress that is that close," Wheeler says. "It was a real nail-biter, and just a tremendous, tremendous victory. That was the highlight of my time here."

Now the assault weapon ban is under attack. "The gun control issue is very contentious," she acknowledges. "It was when there was a Democratic Congress, and it's even more so now that we've got a Republican Congress. The president is standing firm and strong with us, and we're counting on that. It certainly hasn't gotten any easier with the changeover. But we're doing our best and we're still holding them back."

**Kathleen Welch '91:**

***Legal Services Corp.***

**K**athleen Welch joined the Legal Services Corp. in May, following four years at the National Association for Public Interest Law, of which she was executive director. At Legal Services Corp. — a non-profit organization, funded through Congress, that works to increase poor people's access to the justice system — she is one of six program officers, a senior management position.

The organization supports 325 local legal services programs throughout the country that provide low-cost representation to people whose income is up to 125 percent of the federal poverty line. But Legal Services' \$400 million allocation is under attack in Congress — an attack that Welch considers ill-advised.

"Less than 20 percent of the people in America can afford to enter the court system," she says. "But equal justice under the law does not mean equal justice only for those who can pay for it. Part of my job is to help fig-

ure out creative ways to expand our resources and to create new programs that do more with less — for example, by training poor people to represent themselves.”

She also works with local legal services programs to encourage pro bono work by private attorneys. (“Every person who has come through the UB Law School knows the importance of public service,” Welch says, “and I would hope that all of my former colleagues at Buffalo would talk to their local legal aid program and find out how they can help.”)

The job involves administration, evaluating programs, ensuring accountability. It’s not case law, of course, but that’s no problem for Welch.

“There are a lot of different ways that lawyers can work in this world,” she says, “and it’s not only practicing law. I deeply believe in access to justice, and I think legal services lawyers are critical to help people improve their lives.”

### **K. Jill Barr '93:**

#### *National Association for Public Interest Law*

**J**ill Barr was working as a pro bono coordinator in New York’s Southern Tier when Kathleen Welch called to tell her of an opening at the National Association for Public Interest Law, a national coalition of 135 law student member groups. “I had always thought about coming to D.C. to do public-interest work,” Barr says, “but I knew that getting a foot in the door was a little difficult.” So she jumped at the chance.

That was in September 1994. Since then, Barr has helped administer programs including the NAPIL Fellowships for Equal Justice, a national postgraduate fellowship that places seven or eight fellows each year in poor communities to do legal work.

The fellowships are intended to address real-world issues with direct action. For example, she said, a fellow

in rural southern West Virginia helped one community gather state and federal support to clean up its drinking water supply, which had been contaminated by toxins from old coal mine shafts. In another case, a fellow who was a member of the Cherokee Nation moved onto a reservation of the Passamaquoddy tribe in northernmost Maine, providing legal representation on entitlement issues to people whose closest lawyer otherwise would be two hours away.

The Fellowships for Equal Justice, which are privately funded, typically draw about 40 applicants each year, Barr says. She says there have been a handful of applicants from UB Law School, some of whom have made it to the semifinalist pool, but no fellowship recipients from UB yet.

“There are different ways you can view the work of a lawyer,” Barr says. “I don’t necessarily see a lawyer as someone who represents clients in court, but as one who works toward having all people have access to the justice system. I’m providing more opportunities for law students and lawyers who want to do the work, to go into poor communities and represent their needs. I find this job rewarding in that I can open up those doors of opportunity.”

### **Sara Nichols '88:**

#### *Physicians for a National Health Program*

**S**ara Nichols, who previously worked for Congress Watch, moved in October to a newly created position: Washington director of Physicians for a National Health Program. The group, she says, represents more than 7,000 physicians nationwide who favor a single-payer national health insurance program like the one that exists in Canada.

“It’s an unusual constituency for such a program,” says Nichols, who spent two years lobbying for health care reform during her tenure at Congress Watch. “But physicians are

finding increasingly that their own autonomy and control of their medical decisions is being threatened more and more by corporate-controlled decision makers. Increasingly, some bureaucrat at the other end of an 800 number is questioning their medical judgment.”

The doctors she represents are largely general practitioners, internists and pediatricians — non-specialists who are fed up with doing paperwork to bill multiple insurers, and who want to retain their autonomy to make medical decisions.

Nichols acknowledges that health care has been pushed to the back burner by Congress’ noisy battles over balancing the federal budget. But, she says, “in poll after poll, if you ask people what are their top concerns and you don’t even mention health care — people have to come up with the answer on their own — health care is the No. 1 issue. I don’t think the Congress is going to be able to ignore it for very long.

“I think it’s probably the most fundamental human rights struggle of the late 20th century for this country, the right to health care. The single-payer movement in particular unites people and brings them together and moves them forward like no other current human rights struggle in this country. That excites me and moves me to keep working.”

Her position, Nichols says, is evidence that an entrepreneurial spirit can succeed even in public-interest work. She is the first person to work full time in Washington for Physicians for a National Health Program, which is headquartered in Chicago. “The job was something I kind of put together and created,” she says. “If you’re entrepreneurial in the public interest, in essence you can become a solo practitioner. It’s really exciting to strike out on your own and feel like you’re doing something that needs to be done. It is possible to make a living doing this, and actually I’m making a pretty good living.” ■