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Law School Report

Funding good work



Elena A. Gekas '03 and Paul A. Sanders '03, with herdsmen in Nairobi, working for the Kenyan Human Rights Commission.

Buffalo Public Interest Law Program offers stipends for interns

For law students, summer is a time to put the endless reading aside for a few months and, with any luck, settle into an internship that brings a taste of the lawyer's life.

That works fine for UB Law School students interning at a law firm or a corporate law department. But for those whose passion for the law runs to public-interest work, there is a pesky little problem of money: Most public-interest internships pay nothing. How is a struggling student to survive?

Enter the Buffalo Public Interest Law Program, a student-run program that is one of UB Law's most active and most successful. Founded to help students take internships in public-interest settings, the group awards fellowships to UB Law students to help make that fi-

nancially possible. This year, seven students received BPILP fellowships of about \$3,500 for the summer.

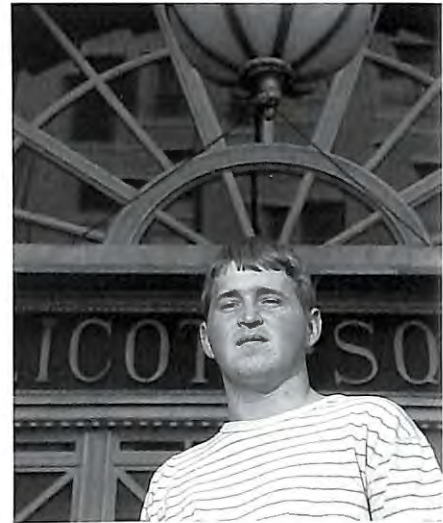
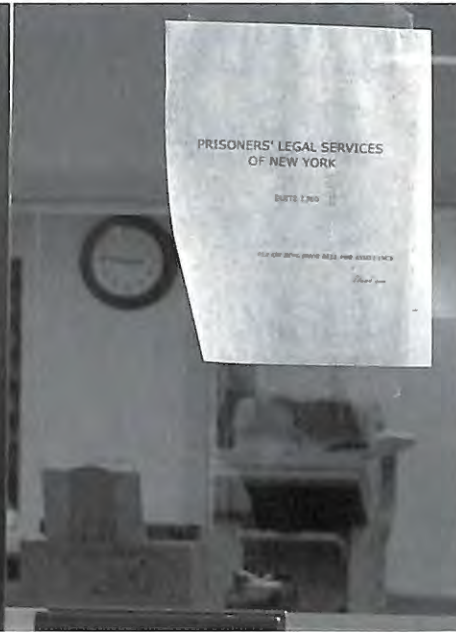
"Someone might make \$2,000 or \$3,000 a week working for a big law firm for the summer," says third-year student Stephanie Rohrer, co-chairwoman of BPILP with fellow third-year Elena Gekas. "But public-interest internships are almost always unpaid. Unfortunately, law students are not taking those jobs because they cannot afford to. Our mission is to fund people so they can."

To do that, BPILP has established a highly successful annual auction, held this year on March 1 at Samuel's Grande Manor. It is an extravaganza of goods and services offered to the highest bidder – from wristwatches to artwork, jewelry to clothing, BAR/BRI gift certificates to a mountain bike. More exotic offerings included a tour of wine country with lunch, offered by three professors, and dinners for eight prepared by chef-professors.

"We have been trying to expand the auction," the group's major fund-raiser, Rohrer says. "We had more people attend this year who were not in the legal field. It was a good step in the right direction. And many businesses now expect us to solicit their donations, so it is becoming a little easier."

The group's other fund-raisers, she says, have included a faculty music jam at the Pearl Street Grill. But the auction raises the most – \$17,500 in sales and ticket fees. "We are one of the few fund-raising organizations that is looking for more than money," Rohrer says. "We appreciate creative donations that go over well. A batch of cookbooks, for instance – you would be surprised at how well something like that sells."

"UB really is a public-interest law school, and we have received a lot of support from the administration," says Gekas, who worked for the U.S. Immi-



Diana C. Proske '03 at Prisoners' Legal Services, in Buffalo, left. Michael H. McCormick '04, Neighborhood Legal Services, Buffalo.

gration and Naturalization Service in Buffalo this past summer on a BPILP fellowship. She points out that there is a fellowship committee that awards the grants, separate from the fund-raising arm of the organization.

Gekas' work last summer is a case in point of the kind of internships BPILP helps to fund. She and fellow student Paul Sanders traveled to Nairobi to work for the Kenyan Human Rights Commission, doing research on that nation's cut-flower industry – the world's third-largest supplier of cut flowers is Kenya. Sanders was there on a BPILP fellowship; Gekas took out a loan, a heavy burden.

But the work, she says, was fascinating: They interviewed flower-farm laborers about their working conditions, and some spoke of 12-hour days for which they were paid \$1 a day, with no benefits. They also ran discussions with groups of workers. "It was empowering to bring people together and discuss their lives," she says. The goal of the project as a whole was to think about ways to pressure the global companies that run the industry to improve working conditions.

Similarly, second-year UB Law student Shaun Ellis is worked this summer – thanks to a BPILP fellowship – with the statewide group Citizens' Environmental Coalition, in Buffalo. He says the internship incorporated two projects. The first was research on mass animal agriculture

The summer 2002 Buffalo Public Interest Law Program fellows, and the internships they have accepted:

- Shaun M. Ellis '04, Citizens' Environmental Coalition, Buffalo.
- Elena A. Gekas '03, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, Buffalo.
- Lara Kasper-Buckareff '04, Farmworker Legal Services, Rochester, N.Y.
- Michael H. McCormick '03, Neighborhood Legal Services, Buffalo.
- Manuel A. Prado '04, Legal Aid Bureau, Housing Unit, Buffalo.
- Diana C. Proske '03, Prisoners' Legal Services, Buffalo.
- Erica R. Williamson '03, Legal Aid Society, Prisoners' Rights Project, Brooklyn.

in Western New York – "looking at the available state data about the environmental effects of these farms, studying the regulations, and talking to farmers and concerned citizens. I also researched farm runoff and the practice of spreading sewage sludge." The second project, Ellis says, was with the coalition's Environmental Hazards Advocacy Project; it involved working to develop Geographical Information System maps of potential environmental threats, such as from chemical plants, if there were to be a disaster of some sort.

"My undergraduate degree is in biology, so I am interested in getting a different perspective and being a non-traditional lawyer," Ellis says. "I would not be able to go into a job like this without the BPILP fellowship. I would be starving otherwise."