Help Where It's Needed: For Committed Students, Fellowships Make Summer Public-Interest Work Possible

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Help where it’s needed
For committed students, fellowships make summer public-interest work possible

UNY Buffalo Law School’s commitment to the practice of public-service law is nowhere more in evidence than in the Buffalo Public Interest Law Program, and this summer’s public-service interns carried on a proud and growing tradition.

With financial support from BPILP, the Law School dean’s office, the SUNY Buffalo Law Alumni Association, the Buffalo Human Rights Center and individual sponsors, 23 students were able to take unpaid internships in the public interest – work experiences that they may not have been able to afford otherwise.

The centerpiece fund-raiser for the program, the 17th annual BPILP Auction, raised more than $35,000. Fellowships were awarded through a competitive process.

Conversations with a few of the awardees reveal a broad range of experiences and duties – learning that will stay with them through law school and on into their careers.

As a Virginia Leary Human Rights Fellow, Candace Filipski ’13 worked as a law intern on employment discrimination cases with the Buffalo office of the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.  “It’s like the job of a first-year associate,” says Filipski, who during the school year serves as student co-director of the Buffalo Human Rights Center. “I’m right in there, handling some racial discrimination cases and a lot of sex discrimination cases, such as sexual harassment in the workplace.” A major role has been working on a decade-old nationwide case in which the EEOC is representing over 200 women claiming sex discrimination.  “I’ve been able to assist with getting in touch with claimants, letting them know about recent movement in the case, contacting witnesses and interviewing people who would be good witnesses,” she says.

The experience, says Filipski, whose internship last summer was as a clerk for a federal district court judge, has imparted some advocacy skills as well. “When I was working for the court, I was helping settle disputes between two parties,” she says. “Here it’s definitely advocating for one side. Last year was heavy on the research and writing; here I’ve had a lot of interaction with people. For me, it’s the best of both worlds.”

Sarah Fenster ’14 stayed in Buffalo this summer as well, working in the Guardianship Department of Legal Services for the Elderly, Disabled or Disadvantaged of Western New York. Her work was supported by a Dean’s Buffalo Public Interest Law Program Fellowship.

The department, she says, takes on the role of guardian for the person and/or the property of incapacitated or elderly individuals – people whose health problems render them unable to make their own decisions, and who don’t have a family member to step in.

“I’ve always been very interested in public service and public-interest work,” says Fenster, who worked for a year as an AmeriCorps volunteer before entering SUNY Buffalo Law School. And despite the difficult circumstances faced by her clients, the commitment of her summer colleagues has inspired her. “Everyone just seemed very knowledgeable and compassionate,” Fenster says. “They
would bend over backwards to do anything for these people. These are sad situations, but that puts an even stronger feeling of purpose in the work we do, because we’re the ones who are there to help them; they don’t have anyone else.”

Because the internship is unpaid, she said, having the fellowship support meant she could be there full time, rather than having to seek outside employment to make ends meet. “It’s different when you’re there day in and day out,” she says. “It’s really allowed me to get so involved in the organization by being there every day and really focus on the legal work.”

Her classmate **Luisa Johnson ’14** clerked for Hon. Jonathan Feldman of the U.S. District Court, in Rochester, as a BPILP Fellow. Johnson serves on BPILP’s executive board.

“For me,” she says, “to best serve the public and people in general you have to understand the system. Working in the federal court system, I’m really getting a better understanding of what each person’s role is, how the judge navigates those roles and how the other participants fit into their roles. The most valuable part has been seeing inside the chambers and really understanding what’s going on on both sides of the table and what the judge wants.”

So, for example, she has attended court proceedings such as competency and sentencing hearings, as well as trials, and has “spent a lot of time researching cases and issues, writing draft recommendations, memoranda, summarizing issues and arguments, and giving recommendations.” One enduring lesson: “The tiniest details matter.”

Judge Feldman, she says, was a federal public defender and U.S. Attorney before ascending to the bench, “so he’s seen it all. Any time that I have questions, he’s more than happy to have me into his office and talk with me.”

And **Joe Schaffer ’14**, also a BPILP Fellow, felt the brunt of the summer heat wave while working for the Refugee Resettlement Program of the Arizona Department of Economic Security, in Phoenix.

He worked with Mutual Assistance Associations — “organically formed ethnic communities” such as Bhutanese, Congolese or Burundian immigrants — to help them become more effective advocates for refugees. His contributions involved working on grant writing and legal support to help meet the exacting requirements for federal granting and procurement. He also worked with some associations to establish a “health navigator” position, providing direct case management or guidance in how to access health care services.

“It can be really hard for the churches and others doing resettlement to get through to communities that don’t have the same cultural background we do,” notes Schaffer, who worked with refugees in Idaho for two years after earning his undergraduate degree — the experience that inspired him to go to law school. “We’re trying to make it easier for them to join the party.”

Schaffer says he may continue to work long-distance with his colleagues during the school year. Refugees, he says, are “not just something you see on the news or in movies — these are real people that you can talk to and learn what they went through. I’m kind of hooked. It’s a really good fit for me.”

And the financial support, he says, has been invaluable: “I’ve had to rent a place out here and pay for utilities and gasoline. I don’t know if I could have done it without the BPILP Fellowship.”

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**Candace Filipski ’13:**

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—Sarah Fenster ’14