A Force for Good: Students Reflect on Their Summer Work in the Public Interest

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A force for good
Students reflect on their summer work in the public interest

Continuing SUNY Buffalo Law School’s long tradition of support for students exploring public-interest work, two dozen spent the summer in not-for-profit agencies, courts, and prosecutors’ and public defenders’ offices, funded by fellowships that made it all possible.

Under the umbrella of the student-run Buffalo Public Interest Law Program (BPILP), 21 students received funding for their summer work. Three others received support through the national Equal Justice Works Summer Corps Award program.

Last spring’s 18th annual BPILP Auction of goods and services generated nearly $40,000 toward these fellowships, which enable students to work without pay in public-service positions.

Catching up with a few of these talented students, we found a wealth of learning and a renewed commitment to using their developing legal skills to help real people in need.

Jasmine Liverpool ’14 worked in the Domestic Violence Unit of the Kings County District Attorney’s Office in her native Brooklyn.

“My most important thing is doing trial advocacy,” Liverpool says. “I knew the DA’s office was where I needed to go. And I knew I wanted to be back home in Brooklyn, so it was very important for me to be able to come down and network.”

Working under a practice order, Liverpool represented the DA’s office in court proceedings on domestic violence cases, such as motions to dismiss a case or refer an offender to a drug abuse or anger management program.

“I was never just twiddling my thumbs or sitting at a desk all day,” she says. “I was always moving, doing hands-on work. If I wasn’t in court, I was doing intakes, interviewing women who came into the office. Besides the cops, I would be the first person they would talk to. We had to figure out what happened and whether to prosecute.”

The work can be emotional, she acknowledges, but “I learned not to internalize any of these things. I saw so many of these cases come in, one worse than the next. You just have to get to the bottom line and figure out whether we can prosecute or not. Over 90 percent of the time, these things plead out.”

Liverpool’s work was subsidized by the inaugural Suzanne E. Tomkis Women, Children and Social Justice Advocacy Fellowship. “I was exceptionally grateful for the fellowship,” she says.

Matthew Fanciullo ’15 calls his internship with Hon. Lawrence E. Kahn, of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of New York, in Albany, “really incredible.” Along with one other full-time student intern and two partners, he spent the summer researching and writing on legal issues facing the court. He even had one piece published in the New York Law Journal.

“All day, every day, I could work on my writing,” Fanciullo says. “All the clerks here are from Ivy League schools, they were on Law Review, they’re brilliant guys, and any time I needed a question answered about anything, they gave me the time. It’s a very collegial atmosphere. Judge Kahn is really brilliant, and he’s hilarious, too. Even some of the other judges would sometimes invite us to their proceedings and discuss with us why they ruled a certain way, what was in their mind, what they said to the attorneys to try to get them to settle.”

The BPILP fellowship he received, Fanciullo says, made the internship happen. “I don’t know if this would have been a possibility without the funding from my fellowship,” he says. “I suppose I could have worked less and gotten less out of it and had another job as well. But if I had to leave earlier every day, it wouldn’t have been as helpful. So BPILP was huge in this. I really appreciate that there’s an organization like that.”
Amanda Sullivan ’14, who worked with Mid-Missouri Legal Services Corp. in Columbia, Mo. Sullivan, who is in the joint JD/MSW program, expects to live in Missouri after graduation and wanted to become familiar with Missouri law this summer.

Her agency serves low-income clients either bringing or defending themselves against civil actions. Under what in Missouri is called Rule 13, she was certified to practice in court under attorney supervision. “This was my first experience in court,” she says. “But a lot of the judges are so helpful. They’ll see a Rule 13 student and come down and introduce themselves.”

Her cases involved mostly issues in family law: housing issues, orders of protection, Medicaid claims. Many were ex parte situations in which a client was seeking child visitation, child support or safety measures such as the relinquishment of firearms by an offender.

Sullivan used her interviewing skills from social work school in working with these clients, but says she really learned the ropes from her supervising attorney, Michael Carney. “Relationships are dynamic; they are fluid things,” she says. “A woman might be fearful for her life one day, but not the next. It’s really important to set boundaries and understand that people are going to make their own choice. You’re not there to counsel or empower, you’re just there to make sure they are getting their point across before the judge.”

Ann Dillon ’15 was one of two Kaplan & Reynolds Fellows, an alumni-funded fellowship. Her summer internship was spent in Chicago at Access Living, a not-for-profit that promotes independent living for people with disabilities. She got interested in special education law, she says, when before law school she taught on Chicago’s South Side, “working with a lot of kids who came from families that didn’t know their legal rights. You just see a lot of families who need legal representation and they might not even know it.”

Working in the legal department at Access Living, she helped represent individuals with disabilities in cases alleging discrimination in housing or other public accommodations. The goal, she says, is to get people into the least restrictive living environment that meets their needs, so they can lead independent, self-fulfilling lives. The clients included people with developmental disabilities such as Down’s syndrome or cerebral palsy, all sorts of physical disabilities, and afflictions such as crippling anxiety or depression.

With only four attorneys on staff, “I got to do a little bit of everything,” she says—a lot of research, writing an appellate brief, attending hearings for class-action lawsuits, doing intake interviews with potential clients, even writing newsletters.

“There’s a different sense of urgency when you’re working for a real client,” she says. “I had always thought of going into education law; I had never really considered disability law. But you see how many different social issues there are that really need lawyers advocating to further the cause.”

Amanda Ruth Webber ’15, too, returned to familiar ground this summer: her native Adirondack Mountains, where she arranged a legal internship in Ray Brook, N.Y., with Region 5 of the state Department of Environmental Conservation (where the supervising attorney is Michelle Crew ’94).

Mostly, Webber says, the work involved administrative law, such as the permitting process for dams or docks, and the web of regulations that govern petroleum storage for cars, boats and airplanes. Her office also monitors how towns and villages contain and treat wastewater runoff.

“A lot of it is very technical,” she says, “and there were a lot of technical terms I wasn’t familiar with. I spent four or five days in the field throughout the summer, with the engineers explaining to me how things work.”

She also witnessed firsthand how the good intentions of the law sometimes butt up against hard fiscal realities, when she sat in on a meeting with a small municipality whose wastewater treatment plant was out of compliance. The municipality couldn’t afford to fix the problem.

“Our Office of General Counsel sat down with officials of this municipality and said, ‘This is what’s wrong, what needs to be fixed, what the regulations are. You’re supposed to go about it this way,’ she says. “It was a sharp realization for me that the law doesn’t live in isolation—there are real-life implications. Slapping a huge penalty wasn’t going to solve the problem here, but at the same time you can’t eliminate all penalties.

“The main thing I learned was that it’s our job to act in the public interest. I got to see how what we did actually had an impact.”