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Great Work for the Greater Good

UB Law Forum

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The idealism that drives many to go to law school is alive and well at UB. For many students, learning the law means finding an exciting new toolbox for making a real difference in the lives of real people.

Melinda R. Saran ’86, vice dean for social justice initiatives, sees the need every day as she fields calls from organizations eager for the students’ help. She helps match students with a wide range of placements, from judicial clerkships to traditional legal services like legal aid, to roles as legal navigators for pro se litigants. The range of needs is great, and School of Law students come through.

Saran notes that students now are required to perform 50 hours of pro bono legal service as a prerequisite to New York State bar admission, but says many students go far beyond the requirement. “They want to try law in a safe place, but they also want to have the opportunity to do things,” she says. “They don’t want to be stuck in a room writing memos, and in most of these legal services you get to be in the action.”

She cites as an example the “chaos” in Buffalo City Court when housing court meets on Fridays. “They get to see the reality, and see that it’s different from what they learned in property law class,” Saran says. “For some, it helps them understand what the practice of law really is. It’s not Law & Order — everything isn’t resolved in 42 minutes.”

The work that these students do, Saran says, also forms a fundamental understanding of lawyers’ professional responsibility. The lesson: “You can do it as part of your practice and make it a part of your life. It’s a duty of lawyers to provide legal services to people who would not otherwise have access to justice.”

For their part, the students say it’s both satisfying and humbling to try out their burgeoning legal skills. As a third-year student, Christine McClellan ’17 was a Pro Bono Scholar, spending her final law school semester at the Erie County Bar Association’s Volunteer Lawyers Project. There she worked with the limited scope legal clinics, including the Family Court Help Desk and the Say Yes Legal Clinics in the Buffalo Public Schools. She volunteered there since her first year, working at a help desk to guide often perplexed citizens on how to manage the court system. “I just loved the experience from the beginning,” she says. “I loved working directly with the clients and being able to work one on one with people.”

Staffing that desk, she did intake interviews and conducted triage for the attorney on duty in the court’s limited scope representation program. “It’s really important to be able to communicate effectively with your clients and make sure that you learn how to address delicate or uncomfortable or difficult issues in a strategic and comfortable way for them. The nature of many of the cases is very challenging and personal, and you have to make them feel safe while they’re talking to you.”

Her classmate Adela Smehlik ’17 served as an extern at Journey’s End Refugee Services on Buffalo’s Lower West Side, greeting clients on Friday who came to see an attorney through the agency’s walk-in legal clinic.

One thing she learned: “It’s very case-specific. What works for one client might not work for the other, and you have to approach each situation through a different critical lens. I don’t think I would ever have learned something like that if not for this situation.”

At Journey’s End, she worked with refugees and immigrants from all over the world: Somalis, Iraqis, Afghans, Burmese. “I never saw myself going into immigration when I started law school; now it’s the direction I want to go in,” she says. “It’s definitely such a rewarding experience.”

Great work for the greater good

Gayle T. Murphy ’86 of Volunteer Lawyers Project and Vice Dean Melinda R. Saran ’86 show off a proclamation signed by Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown recognizing the dedication of organizations that provide volunteer legal services.
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**Top talent, high responsibility**

Public service takes many forms, and New York State taxpayers will be glad that one of them is service in state government.

That’s because New York, through its Excelsior Fellowships program, identifies and recruits top legal talent for fellowships intended to develop the next generation of government leaders. Three 2016 UB School of Law graduates were recruited into the program, and three current students are finalists awaiting their post-graduation assignment.

Among last year’s graduates, Andrea DiNatale ’16 was assigned to the General Counsel’s Office of the Department of Environmental Conservation; Erica Pandolfo ’16 was assigned to the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities; and Anaiss Rijo ’16 works with the State Liquor Authority’s Division of Alcoholic Beverage Control.

Excelsior Fellowship placements are for two years.

“There aren’t that many positions in state government for new attorneys,” says Marc R. Davies ’03, associate director for career services, who administers the program at the School of Law. “But placements for our graduates are legal placements if that’s what the candidate wants to pursue.”

More than 60 percent of the first class of Excelsior Fellows were offered permanent positions after their fellowships were completed.

**Here, there and everywhere**

A partial list of where UB School of Law students are applying their talents to serve the public’s interest:

- Clerkships for federal court judges and in New York State Supreme Court
- The Department of Justice’s Executive Office for Immigration Review
- Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo
- Neighborhood Legal Services in Buffalo
- The Erie County Bar Association’s Volunteer Lawyers Project and its Attorney of the Morning Program
- Public school-based Say Yes legal clinics
- Erie County Family Court
- Center for Elder Law & Justice in Buffalo
- Internships with New York State Assembly representatives
- District attorney offices in Erie, Niagara and Monroe counties
- Western New York Law Center
- Jericho Road Community Health Center in Buffalo
- Summer fellowships supported through the Buffalo Public Interest Law Program
- A national Immigrant Justice Corps fellowship