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How I Spent My Summer: Public-Interest Internships Range Far and Wide

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How I spent my summer
Students’ public-interest internships range far and wide

From Buffalo to Europe, the Middle East and Africa, more than two dozen UB Law students spent the summer exploring the byways of public-interest legal work. All benefited from cash grants made by the student-run Buffalo Public Interest Law Program, which raises money to make it possible for students to take unpaid or low-paying internships in public service.

UB Law Forum conversed with a handful of students about the lessons of the summer, and found that the richness of the experience was greater than any paycheck.

The work that Alex Karsten ’08 did for the International Justice Network was notable not only for its content, but for its form. The IJC is run out of New York City, but Karsten said the start-up organization is pioneering an essentially paperless office. So he bought a laptop and, for 35 hours a week, telecommuted from Buffalo.

The group’s stated goal is to “lead human rights initiatives around the world by providing direct legal assistance and expertise to victims of human rights abuses and by creating a global network of legal professionals, non-governmental organizations and community-based human rights advocates in order to protect and promote human rights and the rule of law.” In his summer work, Karsten worked on several projects, including filing habeas corpus petitions on behalf of detainees at the U.S. air base in Bagram, Afghanistan; creating a “contact point” for justice advocacy groups in Namibia; and working on the IJC’s Web site and extranet, which allows interested parties to share documents.

“I am getting hands-on training in areas of technology that I really feel has begun to revolutionize the public-interest area,” he said. “We really do not have simple locational issues, and locational limitations are not going to be a stumbling block. We have attorneys in California, and it is not a big deal. I really am getting in on the ground floor not only of an amazing new organization, but using this new technology every day. It puts me in a great position for any other projects or organizations that use this technology.”

Working remotely, he said, is no handicap—in fact, it made it possible for him to hold down a paying job at the same time. “I do not necessarily feel that I am missing out on anything,” Karsten said. “I communicate with my boss multiple times a day via e-mail, we have a staff conference every week that we do through a conference call, and quite honestly, the amount that the attorneys are out of the office anyway, it really does not make much of a difference. Plus I am able to get

“Pakistan is going through a lot right now in terms of its democracy. It is trying to find its democratic voice. My role with this organization was to provide knowledge and advice, and to answer questions.”
—Emily Conley ’08, above left, in Pakistan

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my research done at midnight when I am ready to do that. It allows me to be em-
ployed and do this really important work that I love to do without having to swap
myself by taking out another loan. “It has really been a great and rewarding
summer.”

T
he long arm of the U.S. Navy some-
times gets stung with civil lawsuits,
and they end up in the small Maritime
and admiralty Law office in Washing-
ton, D.C. That’s where Ericka Ensign ’09 spent
her summer as one of 28 interns nation-wide
in the Navy’s Judge Advocate General Corps.
The office, she said, dealt with legal ac-
tion arising from “any incident on navigable
waters involving the U.S. Navy.” For in-
stance, she said, if a visitor to a decommis-
sioned vessel serving as a floating museum
breaks his arm, her office would handle the
claim. Or maybe an aircraft carrier was in
the wrong place at the wrong time in the
Persian Gulf, or a fisherman off the coast
of South Korea has his ship damaged by a
Navy vessel. International law often comes
into play in these civil claims.

Ericka Ensign ’09 grew up in Utah
and for the summer lived with her
mother in the tiny town of Bluff,
Utha. But her internship with DNA Legal
Services Inc. in Mexican Hat exposed her
to a culture unlike she had ever known.
DNA (the name is an acronym for Indi-
ian words meaning “Lawyers for the Revital-
ization of the People”) serves Navajo, Ute
and Hopi people on the largest Indian reser-
vation in the United States, called the Nava-
jo Nation. Working there enabled her to live
at home and do meaningful legal work in this
underserved community. Bullet cuts have
reduced a four-attorney office to a sin-
gle lawyer, so Dinimore came into a situ-
ation where dozens of open cases had lan-
guished.

She worked on some contracts and
guardianship cases, she said, but mostly she
tackled a pile of pending divorces, contact-
ing clients to see whether they wanted to
proceed with the divorce, and arranging to
file the necessary paperwork.

That was more difficult than it might
seem. Many on the reservation have no tele-
phones, and often she had to work with a
translator. “It is pretty easy to disappear”
on the reservation, she said, so finding both
parties in an action proved challenging.

“The hardest part,” she said, “is hearing
about their situation now. A lot of these
women are coming to us because they are
losing their benefits. They cannot locate the
father, the father’s name is not on the birth
certificate, and social services agencies say,”If
they do not show us your divorce papers,
you are cut off from benefits.”

And the poverty of her clients, she
said, was shocking. “You realize that a lot of peo-
ple live without running water,” she said.

There is a gas station, and they bring their
tucks to the gas station and fill up their wa-
ter tanks. A lot of people do not have elec-
tricity. We hear every day about Third
World nations in such poverty, but it is hap-
pening right here.

But I definitely learned a lot about how
the Navajo Nation works and how they have
their own legal system and it does work.

They would rather the parties would talk it
out than go straight to court. I think it is a
good approach to law.”

And she drove to and from work, she
said, could not be beat. “It is a 30-minute
commute,” Dinimore said, “but it is proba-
bly one of the prettiest commutes you will
ever have.”

A
s BPLF’s vice president for fundrais-
ing last year, Emily Conley ’08 knows
how big a part alumni contributions play in
enabling public-interest internships.

Many who have worked in such internships,
she said, now give regularly to the organiza-
tion.

Her own summer experience this year
took an unexpected turn when Islamabad,
the U.S. government following a
claimant has some culpability in the sit-
tuation arising from “any incident on navigable
waters involving the U.S. Navy.” For in-
stance, she said, if a visitor to a decommis-
sioned vessel serving as a floating museum
breaks his arm, her office would handle the
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