1-1-2008

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

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Recommended Citation
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How I spent my summer

Students’ public-interest internships range far and wide

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 startup 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...”

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.

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— 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 employed and do this really important work that I love to do without having to swing myself by taking out another loan. “It has really been a great and rewarding summer.”

The long arm of the U.S. Navy sometimes gets stung with civil lawsuits, and they end up in the small Maritime and Admiralty Law office in Washington D.C. That’s where Ericka Ensign ’09 spent her summer as one of 28 interns nationwide in the Navy’s Judge Advocate General Corps. The office, she said, dealt with legal action arising from “any incident on navigable waters involving the U.S. Navy.” For instance, she said, if a visitor to a decommissioned 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.

She and the lawyers in Maritime and Admiralty Law determine the legitimacy of each claim. If the lawyer, and whether the requested relief is reasonable, and examine whether the claimant has some culpability in the situation. The work, she said, involves drafting letters to be sent, writing releases that will indemnify the U.S. government following a lawsuit, and even some of the staff attorneys are employed and do this really important work ready to do that. It allows me to be employed and do this really important work.

Ensign is doing so many different things. “She said, now give regularly to the organization a common goal.”

A major project involved examining the issue of mortality – the many women who die each year because they seek out abortions, which are illegal in Kenya. Williams researched abortion law and statistics, and took part in a mock tribunal in Nairobi around the question, should abortion be legalized in Kenya?

The tribunal addressed other possible solutions to maternal mortality as well, she said, such as adoption, orphanages and better sex education. But the issue of abortion – dramatized by tales of four women who underwent “back-street” procedures – was what drew major press coverage, and protests from Kenya’s religiously conservative community. Activists even stormed the stage at one point before order was restored. One of their objections was the suspicion that legalized abortion is a “foreign agenda” being thrust upon Kenya.

Williams will now write a paper issuing a “judgment” in the mock tribunal, which will be released to the public in February. Another eye-opening experience was visiting the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which is prosecuting the mayor and other government officials who ad-ministered a military crackdown during the conflict between that country’s ethnic Tutsis and Hutus. At that tribunal, which meets in Tanzania, Williams met some of the judges and prosecutors.

Overall, she said, the summer solidified her interest in international law as a career. “It was extremely useful for me,” she said. “You can write briefs and memos anywhere. It was extremely useful for me, “she said. “It was a 30-minute commute,” Dinsmore said, “but it is a good approach to law.”

And the poverty of her clients, she said, was shocking. “You realize that a lot of people live without running water,” she said. “In light of all the violence that broke out in Islamabad in July, I was really lucky to be living with a family,” she said. “They were able to tell me when I should go and where not to go. From the day they picked me up at the airport, I was very well taken care of.”

The Human Development Foundation works in community development in a number of countries. In Pakistan, the group runs literacy programs, sponsors immunization and malaria prevention programs, and establishes schools for girls in remote villages where education is reserved for boys.

The work, she said, was non-traditional legal work. “Last year I worked in a law office, and I was going to court,” she said. “That is clearly legal work. Working at an NGO is a little harder because it is not something you do not show us your divorce papers, you are cut off from benefits.”

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

Left to right: With native Africans, Stefanie A. Svoren ’09, Jodi-Kay Williams ’09 and Sarah Brandtela ’09