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

UB Law Forum

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*“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

## 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.

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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

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# Law School Report

GOING GLOBAL

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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 swamp 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, evaluate 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 payout, and dealing with government representatives around the world about claims.

Part of the office's culture, she said, is that there is a lot of teaching and training going on, and even some of the staff attorneys are quite new to the job. "They are very used to people learning as they go and asking a lot of questions," she said.

"It is a great experience directly out of my first year of law school," Ensign said. "I am doing so many different things." She cites the diversity of the work and its depth—"It is trial by fire. You are given things to do that are worth doing." And, she said, she is

impressed by the caliber of the people she works with. "The nature of the selection process is competitive, and it selects for a good diverse work force to begin with. There is something in them that makes it so they want to do it. They are not in it for the money. These are good people working toward a common goal."

The unpaid internship has left Ensign with a goal of her own: a permanent commission as a Navy JAG officer after law school. She has submitted her application.

**Darice Dinsmore '09** grew up in Utah and for the summer lived with her mother in the tiny town of Bluff, Utah. 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 Indian words meaning "Lawyers for the Revitalization of the People") serves Navajo, Ute and Hopi people on the largest Indian reservation in the United States, called the Navajo Nation. Working there enabled her to live at home and do meaningful legal work in this underserved community. Budget cuts have reduced a four-attorney office to a single lawyer, so Dinsmore came into a situation where dozens of open cases had languished.

She worked on some contracts and guardianship cases, she said, but mostly she tackled a pile of pending divorces, contacting 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 telephones, 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 you do not show us your divorce papers, you are cut off from benefits.'"



Left to right: With native Africans, Stefanie A. Svoren '09, Jodi-Kay Williams '09 and Sarah B. Brancatella '09

And the poverty of her clients, she said, was shocking. "You realize that a lot of people live without running water," she said. "There is a gas station, and they bring their trucks to the gas station and fill up their water tanks. A lot of people do not have electricity. We hear every day about Third World nations in such poverty, but it is happening 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 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."

As BPILP's vice president for fundraising 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 organization.

Her own summer experience this year took an unexpected turn when Islamabad,

Pakistan—where she worked for the Human Development Foundation—was rocked by suicide bombings.

"In light of all the violence that broke out in Islamabad in July, I was very lucky to be living with a family," she said. "They were able to tell me where 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 often education is reserved for boys.

The work, she said, was not 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 more about policy. I taught workshops about American democracy and how it works. 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."

After violence struck Islamabad, Conley

spent the last four weeks of her internship working from home. "One of the suicide attacks took place two blocks from my office, two hours after I left work that day," she said. "After that we decided, no more office for me. That was part of the learning experience for me. Not everywhere in the world is safe, and part of working over there was adapting to the climate so I could be safe." She also adopted traditional Pakistani dress so as not to stand out as an American.

But despite the turmoil, she said, "I had one of the best summers of my life, because I lived with wonderful people who took me in and made me a member of their family. Everyone made me feel so welcome and so at home, and they really went out of their way to make sure I was happy and comfortable."

"I left feeling like I had a second family and a second home."

**Jodi-Kay Williams '09** learned a little Swahili and a lot of international law during the summer she spent in Nairobi, Kenya, working for Urgent Action Fund-Africa, a grant-making organization for women's human rights.

Her work was mostly research-oriented, she said, exploring Kenyan and internation-

al law on issues that affect women's health.

"Because a lot of the African nations were colonized," she said, "many of their laws originated in Europe. There is a lot that is antiquated and needs to change to meet the changing needs of the people there."

A major project revolved around the issue of maternal 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 the 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 mayors and other government officials who administered rape as a tool for genocide 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. This is the real hands-on experience. You are meeting victims, international judges, talking about how laws can be reformed. You are actually doing things here, as opposed to getting assigned things to do."