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Law School Report

JD/MSW: Dual degree with clout and heart

Sara Meerse (JD/MSW '96) developed “a sense of outrage” in law school, where she learned how to fight back and how to persuade. In her social work program, she broadened her perspective as she further explored critical issues in child welfare.

Meerse is one of a cadre of—depending on their occupations—lawyers with social work training or social workers with legal training. These dual-degree graduates function where the two fields intersect. The UB Law School produces a wide variety of dual-competent alumni.

Meerse won a prestigious two-year Skadden Fellowship which funds graduating law students who plan to provide legal services for the poor. She first went to work in Presque Isle, Maine, where she'd been an intern the summer before with Pine Tree Legal Assistance (PTLA), a statewide non-profit legal corporation serving low-income clients. In 2004, now in Portland, Maine, she was a founder of the PTLA subsidiary, Kids Legal.

As its directing attorney, Meerse represents teens and parents in cases where an attorney is not provided by the state. Kids Legal handles cases concerning access to and participation in appropriate school programming for special-education, truant or disciplined students; homeless or unaccompanied youth; and health-related matters.

“Social work is about improving quality of life for individuals, families and groups,” Meerse says. “Law is about ensuring not only that laws are enforced, but also that citizens know what their rights are—definitely a quality of life issue.”

In dual-degree programs, students can count some courses toward both programs



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and reduce the total time required to earn both degrees. By carefully selecting courses, students can shorten their program for two degrees by up to a year. For example, UB’s JD/MSW students take the first year of one program, then the first year of the other, and then two years of coursework in both, finishing with the dual degree in four years. Field placement, a standard part of social work education, is replaced in the JD/MSW program with a full year of law clinic work and a law and social work colloquium. During law school, UB’s Law and Social Work Clinic places students with legal service agencies, social service agencies, prosecutor offices, and in therapeutic courts.

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Andrew Radack (JD/MSW ’97) came to law from an extensive social work background, so combining the degrees was a natural. He now practices criminal and family law in Buffalo, and sits as a village justice in Silver Creek, N.Y. “I try to integrate my social work degree into my legal profession,” he says.

“I’m able to help my clients as well as defendants who appear in front of me. I often suggest that people get the treatment they need, especially those with addictions. It is in their best interest to show the court that they’re doing something regarding counseling or treatment.”

Says Carolyn Siegel (JD/MSW ’99), an education policy specialist and Colden, N.Y., town justice, “I figured I would either end up as a social worker with clout or an attorney with a heart.”