

marquette volunteer

serving the underserved

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Tanner Kilander, L'02 (left)

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Marquette law students and practicing attorneys have come together for a special purpose—to operate a legal clinic at the House of Peace in Milwaukee. The clinic, developed by two law students (now alumni) in conjunction with Marquette Law School and the Association for Women Lawyers, fits in well with the Law School's Jesuit mission to educate lawyers who are both competent and compassionate.

Once a week, the clinic gives student volunteers an opportunity to team up with volunteer lawyers

legal clinic

and address the problems of people who might not otherwise have access to legal services. The clients receive assistance with a variety of different problems, and the students obtain firsthand experience in dealing with real-life legal problems.

The Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinic is a joint effort of the Association for Women Lawyers, the House of Peace, and Marquette Law School. It relies heavily on the volunteer efforts of more than 60 students and nearly 30 lawyers. The clinic is overseen by a steering committee consisting of Jessica Abbott, L'02; Julie Darnieder, L'78; Jennifer Schober Goodwin, L'00; Cathy Grogan, L'00; Sarah Huck; Tanner Kilander, L'02; and Laura Gramling Perez.

"It's a great example of a bunch of people coming together in an ad hoc way to fill a hole in the legal services that people have available to them," explained Perez, who serves as both a steering committee member and a volunteer lawyer.

From 4 until 7 p.m. each Tuesday, a group of about five lawyers and up to 10 students staff a legal clinic in the House of Peace's basement. Between 15 and 20 clients show up each week looking for help with a variety of problems, including landlord-tenant disputes, family law questions, employment-related issues, and more. Volunteers address whatever legal issues come through the door on a given evening.

Two law students team up with a practicing attorney and meet with a client. The goal is to determine the problem and attempt to resolve the situation or refer the client to a legal services group. The clinic is not designed to

establish legal representation extending beyond the time that clients are in the clinic.

Julie Darnieder, L'78, is a volunteer lawyer who helps coordinate the clinic's activities. Darnieder explained, "People walk in and we help them at the clinic, give them referrals, help them fill out forms, answer any questions they may have, and send them on their way. It's a limited but nonetheless rewarding relationship."

Tanner Kilander helped develop the clinic while she was a Marquette law student. The 2002 graduate provides legal services to residents of Meta House on Milwaukee's East Side in her solo practice, helping women in the treatment program identify and resolve their legal issues. Kilander, who continues to be involved in the Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinic, has been amazed at how much the teams at the clinic can accomplish in a short period of time.

Kilander said, "Sometimes it's as simple as a guy who comes in and says, 'Here are all the papers I've got. What do they mean?'"

One of the recent experiences that emphasized for Kilander the purpose of the clinic involved a man who was out of work and unable to pay his child support. He desperately wanted to see his son, but he believed he didn't have visitation rights.

"Here's a guy who has been walking around for months thinking he has no right to see his children," Kilander recalled. "He's just aching to see his kids but thinks that because he has no job, he has no right to see them. He walked out of here and the next day filed his forms to request visitation."

Brother Mark Carrico, executive director

The mission of the House of Peace, located at the corner of 17th and Walnut Streets, includes meeting the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of people. The House of Peace operates an emergency food pantry and clothing closet. It also hosts a nursing clinic and continues to provide spiritual assistance.

for the House of Peace, located at the corner of 17th and Walnut Streets, said the clinic fits in well with the facility's mission, which includes meeting the spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of people. The House of Peace operates an emergency food pantry and clothing closet. It also hosts a nursing clinic and continues to provide spiritual assistance.

"The people that the House of Peace has always served are the underserved, who are not represented in many facets of life," Carrico said. "They are at the low end of the economic scale. A lot of those people cannot afford legal representation and have no idea how to enter into the legal world."

Carrico praised the lawyers and law students for the way they interact with clients who come seeking assistance. "They offer this professional service to people who aren't used to getting treated very professionally."

In addition to helping the poor, the clinic also serves the law students, who benefit personally and professionally from participating in the program. Angela Kujak and Brian Cholewa, two second-year students, said volunteering at the clinic helps them maintain perspective in their own lives.

"You see what struggles other people have, and they minimize the problems that you have in your life very quickly and bring them into perspective," Kujak observed.

Darnieder said the clinic is designed to allow students to get involved with clients in a meaningful way. The students help with the interviewing process and are able to observe as the lawyers provide legal assistance.

"The students are trained to do the initial part of the interview, so they are not simply observers," she explained. "They are encouraged to ask questions and offer input. If there is any legal advice given, it is done by the attorneys."

Students, who like the lawyers are entirely volunteers, are assigned to one clinical visit per month. When they are not meeting with clients, they have the opportunity to talk with the lawyers.

"The ability to interview a client, develop the facts, identify the issues and, hopefully, come up with some sort of solution, I think is invaluable," Darnieder said. "I didn't have any experience like that when I was in law school."

Laura Gramling Perez agreed, "There's so much academia to the first year of law school; I think it's just great for students to have a chance to actually sit down with real clients and feel like they are starting to use the stuff that they are learning."

Timothy Casey, a third-year law student who has been involved with the clinic since it started, described the experience as a "phenomenal" opportunity. "We get to help out in this small way, but we also get to see attorneys in action and hear what real legal problems are about."

Casey explained that it is very fulfilling when a student can add something to the discussion. "Sometimes the student hears something that the attorney didn't hear, so the student might ask a question that triggers a line of thinking that ultimately leads to some sort of answer to the client's problem."

The clinic also highlights the need for pro bono legal services. Several students related how participating in the project has opened their eyes to the importance of helping those who could not otherwise afford legal services.

Those observations are fitting given that students involved in the Law School's Public Interest Law Society developed the clinic. In 1999, when Kilander was a first-year student, she and Bridget Kenney McAndrew became involved with a subcommittee of that society, where they met some students who had an idea for a student-run legal service clinic. In the spring of 2000, Kilander and McAndrew took the lead in moving the project forward.

Kilander said she and McAndrew, a 2002 graduate who now lives in Cleveland, spent a great deal of time laying the groundwork for the clinic. Along the way, they received guidance and encouragement from then-Dean Howard B. Eisenberg.

"Dean Eisenberg was very supportive, but he also was very insistent that we couldn't just go out and start serving people without a plan," Kilander recalled.

Eisenberg laid out a number of issues the students would have to address before they could open a clinic. Topping the list were finding supervising attorneys and coming up with malpractice insurance. Eventually, those pieces fell into place.

“We had gotten a commitment from Dean Eisenberg that Marquette would do the malpractice insurance if we could set up a good, structured clinic with a group of attorneys who were committed to participating,” Kilander said. “We found our group of attorneys in the Association for Women Lawyers.”

Darnieder was involved with AWL’s Pro Bono Committee when the students approached the group about participating in the clinic. The timing was perfect given that the committee was looking for a project to support. Members of the Pro Bono Committee eventually became the steering committee for the law clinic and provided the initial source of volunteer lawyers.

In January 2002, the legal clinic opened, utilizing space at St. Francis Parish. Kilander acknowledged it was a slow beginning, with one or two clients each night. Eventually, the attorneys began seeing five to six clients in an evening. Throughout its first year, the clinic handled 106 client visits.

After one year, the clinic moved to House of Peace, and things took off. During its first 14 months at the new location, the clinic handled 544 client visits. It now averages close to 20 visits during each three-hour session. In the past two years, the number of volunteers also has grown, going from eight lawyers and a dozen students to 28 lawyers and more than five dozen students.

As the Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinic has grown and evolved, so has Kilander’s role in the project; she has gone from participating as a student to assisting as a volunteer lawyer. The group has witnessed other transitions—one of the most noteworthy being the change in Law School leadership following Eisenberg’s death.

“That definitely put the future of the clinic up in the air,” Kilander said. The volunteers anxiously watched to see how the transition would affect the Law School’s support of the program. She noted that interim Dean Janine P. Geske remained supportive during the year that she served.

Eventually, Marquette Law Professor Joseph D. Kearney was named as the successor. Kearney has stated that the Law School will continue to support the efforts of the legal clinic.

“Dean Kearney made it clear right away that he was eager to support us and that he wants to support us in the future,”

Darnieder observed.

Kearney explained that one of the “primary goals of Jesuit education is to develop men and women for others.” The Law School’s professional education works toward that goal, he said.

“We are in the business of graduating lawyers who presumably will—in a variety of different ways—be of assistance to people in need of legal services,” Kearney said. “The clinic is particularly important both because its volunteers do immediate good and because it serves as a reminder that not everyone who is in need of legal services can afford them.”

Kearney added that he would like to increase the resources that the Law School makes available to the clinic. Currently, the University finances the clinic’s malpractice insurance. Although it is an ad hoc group, the clinic is recognized as a student organization, so it receives \$500 annually from the Law School, in addition to support for photocopying, postage, and office supplies.

Kearney stated that he intends in the near future to increase substantially the Law School’s support for the clinic. “It was probably prudent for the school initially to support the clinic primarily in non-monetary ways. But now that the group has demonstrated its commitment and its ability to serve the community in a way that is so congruent with the University’s ideals, it will give us great pleasure to increase our financial support.”

Looking toward the future, the steering committee has a number of issues to address. As client demand grows, Darnieder said the group will consider adding another day or extending its hours.

Another issue involves transportation to and from the clinic. The House of Peace is outside the University’s student shuttle boundaries, which can create challenges for some students. The group is considering approaching the University about expanding the shuttle boundaries.

As the clinic moves forward, one thing remains steadfast: the group’s commitment to providing legal services to those in need. Kilander said, “It’s inevitable. We’re going to grow, and the House of Peace is a great place for us to do it.” •