

Summer of Service: Marquette Law Students in Public Service Law

BY ANNEMARIE SCOBAY-POLACHEK



T

he summer fellowship program administered by the Public Interest Law Society at Marquette Law School has enabled a growing number of the school's students to engage in public interest and public service work.

There is no question that there are trade-offs for the students. The Eritrean government office where Jennifer Hanson, now a third-year student, clerked last summer did not even have running water. "In the bathroom, there was a bathtub filled with water, so you would just dump a bucket down the toilet when you were finished," she said. "It really didn't bother me, though. It's amazing what you can get used to."

Hanson was one of 15 Marquette University Law School students who received fellowships from Marquette's

Public Interest Law Society (PILS) to help them spend last summer working as law clerks in public interest agencies, both governmental and nongovernmental. Other placements were not as far-flung as Eritrea. They included a Catholic Charities office, legal aid clinics, public defender's and district attorney's offices, and the Task Force on Family Violence and Centro Legal in Milwaukee.

As this partial catalog suggests, each fellowship is different. In Hanson's instance, her job working with an Eritrean commission meant that she was responsible for visiting and then writing reports on Eritrean towns, public buildings, and markets that had been destroyed in a 1998 border war with neighboring Ethiopia. The reports will be used as part of an Eritrean effort to obtain compensation from Ethiopia. While her office's lack of running water, the absence of the internet, and limited phone service gave Hanson an experience of law very different from that



Twelve of the Summer 2006 PILS Fellows photographed in Eisenberg Memorial Hall: From left to right (front row) Julie Piper, Anne Jaspers, Jennifer Hanson, Kristina Hanson, Andrew Hitt, (back row) Todd Kleist, Hussain Khan, Ravae Sinclair, James Swiatko, Jr., Molly Smiltneek, Jessica Marquez, Candace Hayward Hoke.

available in the United States, she says she would not trade her time in Eritrea for anything.

“I feel that I was very productive and useful there, but at the risk of sounding clichéd, I took so much more with me than I gave,” Hanson said. “I learned how much I take for granted in my whole life. I learned that I need a lot less to be happy and to get by than I thought I did.”

Building on Eisenberg’s Example

The PILS summer fellowship program has operated at Marquette Law School for over a decade. Fellows are chosen through a competitive application process that requires students to find the agency they plan to work for and persuasively write how their work would benefit the common good. Fellows are not paid for their time, but receive a stipend to cover their living expenses for the summer. The necessary funds are raised through an

annual auction sponsored by the Law School’s Public Interest Law Society.

The PILS summer fellowship program was established during the tenure of the late Howard B. Eisenberg, who served as Dean of the Law School from 1995 to 2002. Eisenberg passionately believed in a lawyer’s duty to assist the community. Both his writings and his actions emphasized the importance of pro bono legal services and other public interest and public service work by members of the legal profession. Students during Eisenberg’s era also led the creation of the PILS summer fellowship program.

Although his own time as a student preceded this period, Dan Idzikowski, L’90, appointed last year as Assistant Dean for Public Service at Marquette Law School, sees today’s students in the PILS fellowship program as carrying on Eisenberg’s legacy. “Howard Eisenberg

personally embodied public service,” Idzikowski said. “He saw the promotion of justice and faith through service as an ideal at the center of Marquette’s mission as a Catholic, Jesuit university. The PILS fellows are actively entering into the struggle for a more just society—just as Dean Eisenberg did. They are giving concrete expression to their beliefs by giving of themselves in service to those in need.”

Joseph D. Kearney, Eisenberg’s friend and successor as dean, has sought to build upon this legacy over the past four years, both by allocating significant additional resources to the PILS summer fellowship program and by leading the school’s creation of the Office of Public Service (and with it the position to which he appointed Idzikowski).

But it is the students who have been the driving force throughout. The Public Interest Law Society’s annual Howard B. Eisenberg Do-Gooders’ Auction provides the funding for the PILS summer fellowship program. Although the Law School provides administrative support and some alumni also help, the auction is organized by current law students.

“It is an incredible amount of work,” said Heather Placek, PILS president, “but without it, we wouldn’t have the fellowship program.”

The auction has been held in recent years in February at the Pfister Hotel and in February 2007 was attended by more than 400 students, faculty, area attorneys, and other supporters of the Law School, bidding on everything from high-end vacation rentals to homemade Christmas cookies. It raised \$40,000 for fellowships for this coming

summer, and Dean Kearney has matched this amount out of discretionary monies (funds donated by alumni and earmarked to the dean’s discretion).

A Formative Experience

Hussain Khan, 3L, who served as a clerk in the Cook County Public Defender’s Office, found his experience invaluable. Khan grew up in the Middle East and moved to the United States at 18 to attend college at Loyola University in Chicago. “I came to the United States, having seen extreme poverty in both the Middle East and India,” he said. “But at the time, I didn’t know there also was poverty in America. I knew only of one side of America—the side with excellent educational opportunities.”

At Loyola, however, Khan often played basketball with neighborhood teens on the streets just outside of the university. Walking back to the Loyola campus after these basketball games, Khan was struck by the difference between the lives of the university students and the lives of the city kids growing up nearby.

“I would see guys going through the court system who really didn’t know there was another way,” Khan said. “Working in the Public Defender’s Office was an opportunity to give some of these guys a chance at a better life.”

Khan’s experience in Cook County was so positive that he plans to apply for a full-time position in that office or in its analogue in Milwaukee.

“I couldn’t have worked there without the PILS fellowship,” he said. “I am so grateful for the experience.”

While students in the PILS fellowship program left their



The annual PILS auction, held at the Pfister Hotel this past February, drew more than 400 guests and raised \$40,000 to help fund the PILS summer fellowship program.

summer clerkships feeling that they had a powerful experience of service, many left also feeling some frustration. Too often, some students said, other attorneys assume that public interest attorneys are in their line of work because they could not get a job with a private firm. They said that some students who feel drawn to serve the public have trouble reconciling their desire to serve with the realities of public interest law—low pay and lack of prestige.

Molly Smiltneek, a third-year PILS fellow who clerked for the Legal Services to Immigrants Program of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee's Catholic Charities, said that it is up to every generation of law students to redefine what success as a lawyer means.

“Deciding whether or not to do public service law is a struggle for many students,” Smiltneek said. “Part of it is economic—students have loans and public interest law does not pay well. But part of it is also the competitive nature of law students. People look at you differently depending on where you work. The great thing about the PILS program is that it exposes more students to a career in public interest law—students who would not have had that opportunity without the fellowship.”

Smiltneek sees Marquette's newly established Office of Public Service as a “huge step forward” for the Law School. “Marquette has a unique responsibility that comes from being a Jesuit school located in the middle of a city,” she said. “There are so many needs to be met in the area surrounding the University. The Law School is in a position to take action and make a name for itself in public interest law.”

Kristina Hanson, 3L, who worked as a restorative justice intern with Alternatives, Inc., in Chicago, agrees with Smiltneek's assessment. Hanson sees restorative justice, which emphasizes that a perpetrator must be made aware of the harm he or she has caused to the victim and community, as a program that would speak to any student with a Jesuit education. Hanson believes that once students experience the satisfaction that comes from public service, there is no going back. “I think that a part of being at Marquette means that you keep your mindset that you are in law to help people.” she said. •

2006 PILS Fellows: Where They Worked

Eric Berg

Department of State, Washington, D.C.

Laurie Best

Milwaukee County District Attorney's Office

Lee Greenwood

Rhode Island Legal Services

Jennifer Hanson

Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary and Claims
Commission, Asmara, Eritrea, East Africa

Kristina Hanson

Alternatives, Inc., Chicago

Andrew Hitt

Office of the District Attorney,
Jefferson County, Wisconsin

Candace Hayward Hoke

Task Force on Family Violence, Milwaukee

Anne Jaspers

Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic, Chicago

Hussain Khan

Cook County Public Defender's Office

Todd Kleist

Cook County State's Attorney's Office

Jessica Marquez

Task Force on Family Violence, Milwaukee

Julie Piper

Cook County Office of the Public Guardian

Ravae Sinclair

Centro Legal, Milwaukee

Molly Smiltneek

Catholic Charities Legal Services, Milwaukee

James Swiatko, Jr.

Centro Legal, Milwaukee