A Tradition of Leadership:
Law School Alumni in Public Service

By Robin I. Mordfin

As everyone knows, the man holding the highest public office in the land was once an Illinois state senator who also taught constitutional law and other classes at the University of Chicago Law School. President Barack Obama is the most famous member of the Chicago Law family to serve his country, but he’s far from the only one. Alumni and faculty have long been elected to public office on the local, state, and federal levels. They have served the public interest through nonprofits, clinics, foundations, and think tanks, domestically and abroad. Whether helping one person receive adequate compensation through a lawsuit or helping the entire country establish a better judicial system, Law School alumni lead the way in making the world a better place.

Leaders in Government

Chicago alumni are influential in politics, with leaders on the right, left, and everywhere in between emerging from the Law School campus. The Law School prides itself on "the life of the mind" and rigorous debate, with all political ideas subject to scrutiny and examination.

“The University of Chicago Law School provides a learning environment that is characterized both by intense intellectual engagement and by a diversity of political views,” said Susan J. Curry, Director of Public Interest Law and Policy. “This combination provides a law school experience that has proven to be a fertile training ground for public service leaders.”

That diversity is clear in two men who have gone on to serve as U.S. Attorney General: Ramsey Clark, ’50, and John Ashcroft, ’67. Clark, appointed by President Johnson, was instrumental in drafting and passing the Civil Rights Act and traveled the South in the 1960s to investigate school integration. Later, he became a controversial figure when he offered legal defense to Slobodan Milosevic and Saddam Hussein.

Ashcroft served under President Bush and was considered a leading conservative in post–September 11 America, known for an aggressive stance against terrorism and supporting the Patriot Act. Before his appointment, he served as the U.S. Senator from Missouri and two consecutive terms as governor, the only Republican ever to have done so.

Ashcroft, a Chicago native, once described the Law School as “having had an arduous set of rigorous demands as any place in the country … analytical and hard-nosed.” He also said the Law School was “not a touchy-feely place,” and while that may have been true, he did meet his wife Janet, ’68, here.

Clark and Ashcroft aren’t the only bold names to journey from the Law School to the Department of Justice. In fact, another Chicago graduate rescued the department after the Watergate scandal. Edward Levi, ’35, was credited by President Gerald Ford and others for restoring integrity to the Justice Department.

At Chicago, Levi served as University President, University Provost, and as Dean of the Law School. Upon his death, in 2000, Ford called him one of his finest cabinet members.
Public Service Excellence Stems from Law School Culture

Late last year Ajit Pai, ’97, was nominated to be one of the five commissioners of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Until April of 2011, he had served in the FCC general counsel’s office for nearly four years, first as associate general counsel, then as deputy general counsel (with supervisory responsibility for more than 40 lawyers), and finally as special assistant to the general counsel.

Aside from about two years at Verizon and a recent stint at Jenner and Block before his FCC appointment, Pai’s entire career has been in federal government positions. “I didn’t really plan on a public service career when I was coming out of law school,” he says, “but once I got into one, I found the work very engaging.” He moved to Washington following a conversation about career options with District Court Judge Martin Feldman, for whom he clerked after graduation. Pai told Feldman that he had greatly enjoyed studying antitrust law at the Law School, and the judge recommended that Pai should consider a job with the Justice Department’s antitrust division. Pai landed a position there, with the telecommunications task force, where he noticed that the telecom part of his work was as engaging for him as the antitrust part. Among other things, he worked on what was then the largest merger in US history, between Sprint and WorldCom.

After that job, he held three other high-level government positions: as deputy chief counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Administrative Oversight and the Courts; as senior counsel at the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Policy; and as chief counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Property Rights. His responsibilities in those positions ranged from the review of proposed legislation to serving as lead counsel for the Supreme Court nominations of John Roberts and Samuel Alito, and his work touched on matters of national security, constitutional law, Internet regulation, judicial administration, and civil liberties, in addition to a variety of telecom issues.

Pai says that his experience at the Law School—where he won the Thomas R. Mulroy Prize for Excellence in Appellate Advocacy—was crucial for the steady advances that have marked his career: “A strong foundation in the nuts and bolts of legal analysis has been essential for me in handling such diverse responsibilities, and I’ve also benefited from the deep awareness that comes with a Chicago education of the power of incentives. Just as important in the environments where I have been working, I have appreciated the Law School’s culture of open, good-spirited debate inside and outside the classroom. Very often during my career I have been thankful to the Law School for reinforcing the importance of receptiveness to others’ points of view—to listening, learning, and understanding as being critical to achieving the best outcome. I have tried to be true to those values in everything I do.”

The son of two doctors who came to the United States from India shortly before he was born, Pai grew up in Parsons, Kansas, a town near the state’s borders with Missouri and Oklahoma. “My parents looked around for a long time before they decided where they wanted to settle down,” he says. “They wanted a good place to bring up their children, and a place where they could be of service to people who needed their help. The small-town values of Parsons were wonderful, and maybe some of my parents’ commitment to service rubbed off on me. Initially, they were disappointed that I didn’t become a doctor myself, but they’ve certainly come to appreciate my career choice.” He may also have assuaged their concerns when he married a physician, Janine Van Lancker, who is now an assistant professor at the George Washington University Medical Center. Their son, Alexander, was born last August.

At press time, Pai was still awaiting Congressional action on his nomination to the FCC. With any luck, the next phase of his career in public service will soon begin.

(The 1930s produced another graduate who would take his place in history: Bernard Meltzer, ’37, helped prosecute the Nuremberg Trials and members of Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich.) Since the beginning of the Law School’s history, alumni have served in cabinet and senior Executive Branch positions. Harold Ickes, ’07 (that’s 1907), served as FDR’s Secretary of the Interior for 13 years and is the second-longest serving Cabinet Member in history. Other Chicago alumni who have served in the Attorney General’s office include Robert Bork, ’53, who worked as both Acting Attorney General and Solicitor General, and James Comey, ’85, who made headlines as Deputy Attorney General in the George W.
Inspiring Social Change through Legal Action

In 1966, Alexander Polikoff, '53, and a team of lawyers brought America’s first major public housing desegregation lawsuit, *Gautreaux v. Chicago Housing Authority*, challenging CHA’s practices for siting its housing projects. In a companion suit, Polikoff and his team demanded that the US Department of Housing and Urban Development stop funding CHA’s unlawful practices. Three years later the consolidated case was decided in the plaintiffs’ favor in a federal district court, and in 1976 a landmark ruling by the US Supreme Court—before which Polikoff had presented his clients’ oral argument—cleared the way for what the Court described as “a comprehensive metropolitan area plan that will not only disseminate the segregated public housing system in the City of Chicago . . . but will increase the supply of dwelling units as rapidly as possible.”

Today, Polikoff is still actively leading the continuing implementation of *Gautreaux*. He documented many of the twists and turns of that case in his 2006 book, *Waiting for Gautreaux*. One remedy adopted as a result of *Gautreaux*—the use of housing subsidies and other strategies to provide tenants broader options for where they may choose to live throughout a metropolitan area—has now been adopted in various forms in 33 locations around the United States.

When he first led the launch of the *Gautreaux* suit, Polikoff was working pro bono at the ACLU while a partner at Schiff Hardin, where he had been since graduation. In 1970, he became executive director of the Chicago-based law and policy center Business and Professional People for the Public Interest (BPI); he held that position until 1999, and he is still at BPI today as the director of its public housing program.

Under Polikoff’s leadership, BPI’s accomplishments extended beyond housing issues to include preventing the construction of a nuclear power plant adjacent to the Indiana Dunes, winning the largest utility refund in US history from Commonwealth Edison, and...
securing the adoption by the Chicago Public School Board of a formal resolution supporting the creation of small schools. He is the principal author of BPI’s recent study of the role of inspectors general in combating government corruption and a major contributor to BPI’s 2011 report on a successful, innovative approach for increasing public school effectiveness. BPI’s Polikoff-Gautreaux Fellowship, aimed at helping young attorneys learn how to go beyond traditional legal remedies to bring about social change, attracted more than 200 applicants last year. His new book, The Path Still Open, argues that there is still time to bring peace and justice to the world through the use of “cooperative power.”

Polikoff, who also earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Chicago, credits the Law School for fostering his commitment to public interest law: “I was blessed, as so many succeeding generations have been, by a great faculty at an institution wholeheartedly committed to engaging with the problems of the real world. Harry Kalven in particular, but the entire law school experience in general, were absolutely central to getting me involved.” He says that a galvanizing event for him occurred during his first year; when he worked with Kalven, Abner Mikva, ’52, and others on an ACLU brief on behalf of George Anastaplo, ’51, who was denied admission to the Illinois bar after refusing to answer the question, “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?”

Reflecting on the civil rights ferment in Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s, the Pulitzer Prize–winning columnist Clarence Page observed, “From my perspective, the activists who had the most impact on the lives of low-income black families may well have been Alex Polikoff and the rest of his pro bono team of lawyers.”

And Page saw more in Polikoff’s work than legal victories; he saw an inspiring example of the potential scope of public-interest activism. “As Polikoff battled all the way to the Supreme Court,” Page wrote, “he showed us that dedicated public-interest lawyers could beat [not just City Hall but] the White House, too. They could change the nation’s housing policy, and, more important, change lives.” Ultimately, changing housing policy became only one of the many ways in which Alexander Polikoff has changed lives.
counsel to President Clinton in 1994 and also worked for the Department of Justice, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, and the Office of the Solicitor General.

Lisa Brown, ’86, is the current White House Staff Secretary, a job she has held since January 20, 2008, when Obama was sworn into office. In 2004, Brown said she chose the Law School because the lawyers she spoke with said it was the best place to be.

“I was immediately taken by the intellectual environment, by the Socratic method,” she said, speaking at a time when she was Executive Director of the American Constitution Society for Law and Policy, a liberal-leaning organization. Brown said the Law School was a place where all points of view were welcome and challenged.

“The emphasis was not on a particular point of view, but on the importance of defending your point of view in the strongest way possible, with rigorous analysis. It was about the interplay of ideas, the debate. That is what makes American law and democracy strong.”

Federal agencies benefit from the hard work of Chicago alumni, too. At the Department of Homeland Security, Mary Ellen Callahan, ’97, serves as Chief Privacy Officer and Chief Freedom of Information Act Officer. Eric Waldo, ’06, has been deputy chief of staff for policy and programs in the office of the Secretary of Education since November 2010, and Ann Bushmiller, ’82, is Senior Legal Counsel for the National Science Board of the United States.

One of D.C.’s landmarks, the Washington National Cathedral, is overseen by Kathleen Cox, ’79, who serves as Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer. Previously, Cox served as President and CEO of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Law school alumni have had an impact in state and local government as well. Dan Doctoroff, ’84, famously served NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg as Deputy Mayor responsible for Economic Development and Rebuilding for the City of New York from 2001 to 2007. With Mayor Bloomberg, Doctoroff led a successful plan to rebuild downtown after September 11. He also spearheaded an environmental plan for the city that aims for a 30 percent reduction in global warming emissions by 2030. Doctoroff is now CEO and President of Bloomberg L.P. and a University of Chicago trustee. Cas Holloway, ’02, is keeping the Chicago Law presence alive in the NYC Mayor’s Office, where he is currently Deputy Mayor for Operations. (See profile on page 10.)

Quite a few alumni have served in important state government roles, including in state legislatures. Richard Cordray, ’86, for example, served as an Ohio State Representative before becoming, sequentially, Ohio’s Solicitor General, State Treasurer, and Attorney General. Cordray is currently serving as the first Director of the United States Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Closer to home, David Hoffman, ’95, was Inspector General for the city of Chicago and worked to uncover corruption, fraud, misconduct, and waste in city government, having served as Assistant U. S. Attorney in Chicago from 1998 to 2005. He ran for Senate from Illinois in 2010 and currently teaches a course in public corruption at the Law School.

Of course, the Law School has produced many judges who serve the public interest. They won’t be described here, however, but in an upcoming Record story.

**Beyond Government Service**

It is hardly the case that all Law School alumni who serve the public do so in the government. On the contrary, Chicago Law alumni serve in leadership positions all over the country and the world in public service organizations and NGOs. Many of these groups focus on the poor and vulnerable or on issues such as education or sex trafficking. Others promote culture, the arts, or a particular viewpoint.

Lillian Johnson, ’75, has served as Executive Director of Community Legal Services, Arizona’s largest nonprofit civil legal aid program since 1982. President Obama selected Johnson as a “White House Champion of Change” in 2011 for her lifelong dedication to closing the access-to-justice gap in America. (Read more about Johnson on page 7.)

Diana White, ’81, performs a similar role in Chicago. White has served as Executive Director for LAF (Legal Assistance Foundation) in Chicago since 2007 and has been a board member of the Chicago Appleseed Fund for Justice since 2003. The Legal Assistance Foundation provides civil legal services to low-income people and offers Chicago law students service-learning opportunities. Likewise, the Appleseed Fund is a social justice organization that focuses on topics such as reforming the criminal justice system.

White said that during her era at the law school, public interest work was not a major focus for most students. Clinic spots were rather limited, and White focused on the law review and interviewing with private firms. The groundwork for a public service focus was beginning, however: White remembers the public interest auction, in which students raise money to do public interest work, starting during her time here.

Chicago law graduates from several generations work as professional advocates. Willard Ogburn, who earned his JD in 1973, has spent 25 years as Executive Director of
the National Consumer Law Center, a nonprofit advocacy organization that works to build economic security for low-income Americans. Paul Levy, '76, has been an attorney with the Public Citizen Litigation Group since 1977, most recently specializing in free speech issues on the Internet. He has argued four cases before the Supreme Court. And Maggie Blinn DiNovi, '96, is Executive Director of the Chicago office of New Leaders, a national nonprofit that develops school leaders and curricula to improve school systems across the country, with special focus on students in poverty and children of color.

Gary Haugen, '91, has used his law degree well in a long and accomplished career in human rights work. Haugen is the founder of International Justice Mission, a human rights nonprofit that works to secure justice for victims of slavery, sexual exploitation, and other forms of oppression. He currently serves as President and CEO. In a previous role, while working for the Department of Justice in 1994, he was assigned to work with the United Nations as the Officer in Charge of the genocide investigation in Rwanda. He directed an international team of law enforcement, lawyers, prosecutors, and forensics experts in building evidence against the perpetrators. Haugen’s work and International Justice Mission have been profiled on national TV several times. He is the author of the books Good News about Injustice and Just Courage, with another book, this one on the crisis of lawlessness in the developing world, due in 2013.

Chicago alumni also lead political advocacy groups on both sides of the aisle. For example, Ralph Neas, '71, was formerly the president of the liberal group People for the American Way. Before that, Neas led the effort to block President Ronald Reagan’s nomination of Robert Bork to the Supreme Court. He had much less success during the Bush administration, but when he left his post, The Chicago Tribune called him a “top liberal foe of conservative judges.” Neas is now head of the Generic Pharmaceutical Association, an industry group for generic drug makers.

On the other end of the political spectrum is Liz Cheney, '96, a board member of Keep America Safe and the daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney. Keep America Safe is a conservative group focused on national security. Cheney has served two stints as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs and has worked for the World Bank Group and the Department of State.

Other alumni serve in a watchdog role, working to ensure fairness in litigation and business dealings. Ted Frank, '94, is the founder and president of the Center for Class Action Fairness, which is a public interest law firm representing consumers who are dissatisfied with their counsel in class-action suits. J. Gordon Seymour, '93, is the General Counsel and...
even begin to tell you the number of times that some jurisdictional question would pop up and I’d find myself thinking about things I learned from David Currie, Richard Epstein, or another member of that great faculty.”

Holloway lives in Brooklyn with his wife, Jessica, who is an attorney at Brune & Richard. Before attending the Law School, he served as chief of staff at the city’s Department of Parks and Recreation. He came to his later city jobs from Debevoise & Plimpton, a firm he had joined after clerking for an appeals court judge and then starting as an associate with a different firm. He says, “I knew I wanted to return to public service at some time in my career, and Debevoise showed me that it really valued and respected the kind of work I wanted to do. Frankly, I didn’t think my opportunity would come so soon or last as long as it has, but it’s been a phenomenal experience, and I hope all alumni of the Law School will seriously consider the special rewards that come from public service.”

Secretary of the Public Company Accountability and Oversight Board, which oversees the audits of companies to protect the interests of investors and the public. And Nell Minow, ’77, among many other roles, was a co-founder of The Corporate Library, an independent research group that rates the boards of directors of public companies.

Finally, some Chicago lawyers choose to spend their careers at charitable foundations that make so much nonprofit work possible. For example, Deborah Leff, ’77, has held leadership positions in several prestigious foundations, most recently serving as President of the Public Welfare Foundation and Director of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. Also on the long list of organizations she has led are the Joyce Foundation and America’s Second Harvest. Before her foundation work, she held several posts in the federal government, and she has recently returned there, now serving as Deputy Counselor for Access to Justice at the U.S. Department of Justice. Barron M. Tenney, ’69, spent more than a quarter of a century at the Ford Foundation, recently completing his tenure there as Executive Vice President, Secretary, and General Counsel. Before joining the Foundation, he spent nine years at the Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, a community development corporation in Brooklyn.

Shari Patrick, ’82, joined the Rockefeller Foundation in 2008 and currently serves as General Counsel and Corporate Secretary. Lorraine Egan, ’84, is President and CEO of the Damon Runyon Cancer Foundation in New York. Similarly, Gary Edson, ’82, is Chief Executive Officer of the Clinton-Bush Haiti Fund, where he deploys funds and works to rebuild Haiti’s economy. Before he took the leadership position at the foundation in 2010, he served as Deputy National Security Advisor, Deputy National Economic Advisor, and Deputy Assistant to the President for International Affairs in the George W. Bush administration.

The history of public service at the Law School is long and rich, and today’s students are poised to continue that tradition. To read more on what today’s students are doing, see page 32.

The opportunities for gaining experience in public service are greater than ever, said Jeff Leslie, Clinical Professor of Law in the Edwin F. Mandel Legal Aid Clinic.

Years ago, “clinics were the major outlets for public interest oriented students,” he said. “Now they have many outlets.” And as such, even more alumni should be entering public service in the years to come, Leslie added.

Maybe that Chicago Law student-turned-President isn’t too far off.