Students Travel the World to Work in the Public Interest

The Spring 2012 issue of the Record detailed Chicago Law students’ increasing passion for public interest law and the Law School’s effort to meet that interest with opportunities and funding. Of course, that enthusiasm and support is not confined within the United States. The knowledge and hard work of Chicago Law students are valued all over the world.

For the past three years, an increasing number of Chicago students have received funding from the Law School to spend their summers working for nonprofit and human rights organizations all over the globe. Often with the help of faculty members such as Professors Tom Ginsburg, Aziz Huq, and Martha Nussbaum, the students secure summer jobs that enable them to learn about foreign cultures while at the same time serving the public interest. “Many of our students come to law school with a passion for social justice and a desire to make a difference in international settings.”

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This summer, 15 students had international fellowships on four continents: Africa, Asia, Australia, and Europe. They worked for a wide variety of organizations ranging from the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda to the Hague Conference International Centre for Judicial Studies and Technical Assistance in the Netherlands.

Five of those students are Jacobs Fellows, which means their work is funded by the Charles M. Jacobs Fund for Human Rights and Social Engagement. This year, the fund was established by a $2 million gift from the Charles and Cerise Jacobs Charitable Foundation. The fund was split evenly between the College and the Law School.

According to the Law School’s Director of Public Interest Law and Policy Susan Curry, the students who take advantage of these international summer programs tend to be rising 2Ls. They commit to eight weeks in a fellowship, which sometimes turns into a postgraduate job.

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“Many of our students come to law school with a passion for social justice and a desire to make a difference in international settings,” Dean Michael Schill said. “Our program of human rights fellowships allows them to do this and gives them a wonderful taste of how rewarding a career in public interest law can be.”

This year’s fellows were not back in the States by press time, but the 2011 fellows offered to share their experiences here.

Ally Depadua, ’13, India

My work experience in India was the most rewarding, exciting, and challenging thing I have ever done. I was assigned to work with The Lawyer’s Collective, Women’s Rights Initiative (WRI), which is an NGO that I chose primarily because of its focus on women’s issues in the developing world. However, that plan quickly changed when I arrived in India.

The WRI was founded and is directed by Ms. Indira Jaising, an internationally known advocate for women’s rights who, as of two years ago, has also served as the Additional Solicitor General of India. While I was in India, Ms. Jaising was set to begin her oral arguments on behalf of the Union of India in a matter being heard before the Supreme Court. She approached me with the opportunity to work personally with her to prepare her arguments and written submissions, rather than my planned work with the NGO. I said yes, of course.

I was transferred to Ms. Jaising’s offices in Canning Lane, where I worked with two junior lawyers also assigned to the case. Although I was only a legal intern, I was allowed to actively participate in crafting the arguments that were to be presented before the Court when the matter resumed in July. I even was able to contribute some of my knowledge of U.S. and international case law from my 1L classes, and my research was incorporated into the arguments presented by the Attorney General of India.

By far the most challenging part of my job came when it was time for Ms. Jaising to draft her own written submissions. For two weeks leading up to the beginning of her oral
arguments, I had the privilege of brainstorming with my boss, often sitting at her dining room table with my laptop until 10 or 11 p.m., drafting and redrafting her submissions. Although difficult, this was an amazing opportunity. Not only did I get good working knowledge of Indian constitutional law, but there was a sense that the work I was doing was of vital importance—in this case, defending a statute which ensured that all school children ages 6–14 received a free and compulsory elementary school education. Additionally, I finally got over many of the difficulties that I had faced in Legal Research and Writing class during my 1L year—there really is no better way to learn legal writing than to simply sit down and write.

My reward for all this hard work was permission to be present in the courtroom at the advocates’ table each and every day that the matter was argued before the Justices of the Supreme Court. Although legal interns are generally not allowed in the Chief Justice’s courtroom, an exception was made for me as Ms. Jaising’s American “legal assistant.” I got to watch all we had researched and written presented before the highest court in the nation. Thus far I have found no bigger thrill than to hear words that I wrote spoken before the Chief Justice in India and seeing him smile and nod. (And then he quoted our arguments, using my words, later on in the proceedings!)

My experiences in India were not expected, nor could they be considered typical. My incredible luck in meeting Ms. Jaising and getting to work with her and her junior lawyers has left me with an intimate knowledge about how the legal system works in India and an appetite for more international work.

SONALI MAULIK, ’13, SOUTH AFRICA

I worked in the Gender Department at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS) under the direction of senior attorney Mary Munyembate. The Gender Department had recently been resuscitated after going through a hiatus, so there weren’t any cases going on at the time. Instead, Mary and I worked on laying the groundwork for opening a domestic violence clinic in the Johannesburg inner city. My main responsibility was researching domestic violence in South Africa, which included looking at domestic and international laws, reading relevant cases, and researching publications by other human rights organizations. Mary set up appointments for us to meet with government and nonprofit shelters in Johannesburg to discuss resources available to domestic violence victims. Not all the work I did was legal work, but it was all necessary for the clinic’s development. For instance, I helped Mary write the business plan for the clinic and researched funding for the project. I was very happy with
the work I did and was extremely lucky to be under the supervision of Mary, who was an excellent mentor. Not only did she meet with me regularly at work to monitor my progress and see if there was anything I wanted to work on, but she also invited me over to her house and generally made me feel welcome in South Africa.

In addition, I had the opportunity to work in other departments of CALS. I went on a field research trip in rural South Africa to do surveys for the Environment Department. I also did research for the Education Department, and I worked with clients in the Basic Services Department. CALS encouraged us to be involved in anything in which we had an interest. CALS also had a very interesting case going on in the Rule of Law Program and the interns had an opportunity to attend a Constitutional Court hearing.

Adam Sitte, ’13, South Africa

My experience at the Southern African Litigation Centre (SALC) was uniformly positive. I enjoyed the fact that I was always working on projects that interested me. Whenever I was asked to work on a case, I was also asked if it was something I was interested in, and if it wasn’t they would find something different for me. I had great flexibility and freedom in defining the terms of my internship. The staff was full of bright and dynamic individuals from whom I was always learning. I really felt as though they were taking an interest in my professional and personal development while at the organization.

Two projects I worked on stand out. The first was a strategic litigation memorandum on establishing HIV status as a protected constitutional class. I surveyed the law in five countries and made recommendations on where and in what area of law a case would be most likely to succeed. What was most rewarding about this experience was that I was told the organization had chosen a country in which to pursue a suit largely due to recommendations in my memo.

The second project was a judicial removal case. A judge in Swaziland was under removal hearings for alleged misconduct, and SALC was helping with his defense. I worked extensively on the judge’s responses to the allegations against him, and much of what I wrote found its way into his official arguments. I got to interact with the judge on several occasions and participated in a consultation between the judge and his senior legal counsel, who was one of South Africa’s most accomplished constitutional attorneys. What I appreciated most about the internship was that both of my projects had a real impact on my professional development. Not only did I improve my writing and research skills, but also I got a chance to think strategically about where and how to litigate. Moreover, the fact that my cases had an impact on the organization’s litigation plans helped make the experience particularly enjoyable.

Catherine Matloub, ’13, India

I completed an eight-week International Human Rights Fellowship at the Lawyer’s Collective, Women’s Rights Initiative in Delhi from June to August 2011. During this time, I edited and updated the first two chapters of a book entitled Law Relating to Sexual Harassment at the Workplace, published by Oxfam in 2004. Sexual harassment at the workplace was first identified as wrong in India in 1996 with the landmark Supreme Court case of Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan. The book is written as a guide for Indian lawyers to advocate for their clients and enforce this judgment.

Specifically, the two chapters that I edited dealt with the definitions of sexual harassment and how sexual harassment
at the workplace relates to constitutional law. My work consisted of international comparative legal research, incorporating changes in the law into the original edition, generally updating the material, and rewriting significant portions of the text.

In order to accomplish my tasks, I familiarized myself with the Indian Constitution and the recently proposed bill in India addressing the problem of sexual harassment at the workplace. I compared recent trends in the development of sexual harassment law in the United States and the Commonwealth countries. Notable developments around the world include, but are not limited to, a focus on substantive rather than formal equality, the passage of laws specifically targeting sexual harassment as a distinct wrong as opposed to merely a form of discrimination, and an expansion of the definition of what constitutes sexual harassment.

E LLIE N ORTON, ’13, AUSTRALIA

Working at the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) in Darwin was an amazing summer experience. I was assigned to the office’s Criminal Division, where I served as a legal intern. I spent about half my time on research projects and the other half at the Magistrate’s Court, where I took instructions from clients in custody and attended hearings and trials to assist the attorneys. I was also involved in two Supreme Court matters—most excitingly, I wrote a submission (like a minibrief), which was actually used in a sentencing hearing! I occasionally visited clients at Berrimah Prison, as well, to take further instructions or update them on the status of their cases. I really enjoyed the work that I did—both the research and client interaction.

The lawyers at NAAJA are incredibly talented and hard-working. I learned a great deal just by building relationships with them and observing their unique approaches to practicing law. It can be easy to get comfortable working with one or two attorneys, but I tried to work with everyone I could, because I gained so much from each lawyer’s experience and techniques. There wasn’t much hand-holding, so I soon learned that the experience was mine for the taking—it was going to be what I made of it. I did my best to show that I was determined to contribute and help with substantive work.

A highlight of the summer was attending Bush Court (small court sessions held in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory). I went to court twice in Oenpelli, a community about 3.5 hours outside of Darwin, in Kakadu National Park. It was a beautiful setting, but also an eye-opening experience, and an important one for understanding the deep and complex problems facing Aboriginals in the Northern Territory. I found I got to know the lawyers better, as it was two to three days in close proximity with them, working hard to get through a lot of matters. My job was mostly to interview clients, help the attorneys prepare, and occasionally track down witnesses in the community. One day, though, I got to play hookey and help some of the ladies who make traditional baskets for the art center collect roots and pandanus leaves. It was a wonderful opportunity to learn more about Aboriginal culture.

Outside of work, I tried to see as much of the area around Darwin as I could. Litchfield National Park, Kakadu, and Katherine are all incredibly beautiful, and it’s easy to get a group of friends together and take a car there for a day or weekend. I was also able to travel to Vietnam and Bali (for really cheap!) on two weekends, which was amazing. There are so many opportunities to take advantage of in Darwin.