A WIN-WIN-WIN: THE TRIFOLD IMPACT OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST FELLOWSHIP

By Becky Beaupre Gillespie
CARL NEWMAN, ’12, appeared in court more than 25 times between Law School graduation and the day he was admitted to the Illinois Bar. The first time was two days into his fellowship at the Domestic Violence Legal Clinic in Chicago; he was even in court on behalf of a client the day he was sworn in.

That experience was thanks in large part to the Law School’s Postgraduate Public Interest Fellowship, a donor-funded program that enabled him to bridge an experience gap that often stymies other graduates pursuing public interest law.

Determined to meet the needs of students entering public interest careers, as well as underscore the Law School’s own commitment to supporting the need for top-notch lawyers in underserved areas, the school in 2012 began offering six competitive fellowships per year to high-achieving students with a demonstrated record of public service. The fellows receive $44,000 in financial support and serve full-time at an eligible host organization for one year—a win for the graduate, the host agency, and the clients and causes.

“It has a trifold beneficial impact,” said Susan Curry, the Law School’s Director of Public Interest Law and Policy.

“There’s nothing not to love about this program.”

For Newman, the fellowship offered an entrée into an area of law that inspires him, and it meant getting to start his law training in the deep end of the pool.

“To get that same level of experience outside of legal aid probably would have taken me five years,” said Newman, one of the eighteen alumni who has received a one-year fellowship since the program began.

During his fellowship, Newman managed about three dozen clients in the complicated and emotionally charged realm of family law. He learned to negotiate with opposing counsel and even gained experience dealing with opposing parties who had chosen to represent themselves, which “wasn’t a ton of fun.” But he did it. And, very quickly, he learned to swim.

“I really wanted to do public interest work because, in addition to liking litigation and liking winning, I also liked being right,” he said. “There are so many people who want your help, more than you could actually help, and that means you can be very selective about who you take as a client. It meant I could take the cases where I really felt the person could win and deserved to win. That was very rewarding.”

The Law School’s public interest fellowships fill a gap created by the realities of the nonprofit world, where few organizations can afford to train new lawyers and the hiring process doesn’t align with the academic cycle as seamlessly as private-sector work. Public interest students don’t have on-campus interviews—few nonprofits have the money or manpower for recruiting visits—and they rarely start their third years with public interest job offers. Often, they have to wait until after graduation to apply—and, in some states, they must wait until they’ve passed the bar.

“I remember Susan Curry telling me that you have to have nerves of steel for the public interest job search, and you have to be prepared to graduate without a job,” said Erin Whalen, ’13, who worked in the Philadelphia office of Earthjustice, a nonprofit environmental law firm, during her fellowship year. “Often what’s considered ‘entry level’ in public interest is really a position for people who have two or three years of law experience. Getting your foot in the door as a recent graduate can take all of the mental and physical energy at your disposal. You have to know what you’re interested in and seek out those jobs, and then you have to give them a reason to pick up your resume out of the hundreds that are on their desks.”

“At the time, I thought I could probably never get a law job,” she said. “I was looking at teaching. But thanks to the fellowship, I was able to get a job in Philadelphia working with Earthjustice.”

And since few graduates have the option of working for free, finding external financial support for that first job is essential. Other awards—such as the prestigious Skadden Fellowship won by Kara Ingelhart, ’15, as well as a number of other Law School graduates in previous years—play a similar role, but demand exceeds supply.

“What our fellowships do is create a pipeline for public service practitioners in that critical first year,” Curry said. “Obviously in a perfect world, all of these host organizations would have their own budgets for hiring newly graduated staff attorneys, but they just don’t. These fellowships are indispensable.”

Pursuing a Dream

For Christine Ricardo, ’14, a fellow at the National Center for Law and Economic Justice, the program made it possible for her to do what she set out to do.
“This is why I went to law school,” said Ricardo, who worked for a decade in public health and education before going to law school. “I wanted to continue to do socially minded work, just with new tools.” Although she knows well the disadvantages of pursuing public interest work, including the comparatively small salaries and early obstacles, she said opportunities like the postgraduate fellowship, the Law School’s strong track record with outside fellowships like the Skadden, and the loan repayment assistance program make it “absolutely possible.”

“Being at UChicago, we are particularly privileged in terms of being able to make this happen,” Ricardo said. “There are a number of things that can dissuade students from pursuing public interest, and I understand all those arguments. But they lose a lot of their strength when you look at what UChicago offers you.”

And that’s by design, Curry said, noting that support for students interested in public service starts early. The full-tuition Hormel Scholarship gives highly qualified students planning public interest careers the opportunity to graduate from the Law School debt-free. During their time at the school, Curry’s office provides career counseling, funding for summer jobs, networking opportunities, a pro bono program, and a generous loan repayment assistance program (LRAP) for graduates going into public service careers.

“This fellowship program fits right into that menu of supportive resources for a graduate who wants to do public service,” Curry said. “Students are coming here wanting to do public interest. It would be a different matter if 100 percent of our students came here wanting to work in BigLaw, but that’s not the case.”

Among the twelve recipients who completed postgrad fellowships in 2013 and 2014, all twelve were still working in public service as of last fall—five with their original host agencies, six with other public-service agencies, and one with a public-interest law firm. Whalen was one who parlayed her fellowship into a full-time role at the same organization. In September, she moved to Alaska to work as an associate attorney in Earthjustice’s Juneau office.

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Susan Curry, Director of Public Interest Law and Policy, leads a panel of recent public interest fellowship recipients at the Fall 2014 meeting of the Law School Visiting Committee.
“This is my dream job,” Whalen said. “The fellowship meant that I got to work for a year with people who do outstanding work in this area of law and who know who’s hiring and what’s happening in the field. I was able to get in on the ground floor and show them what I could do. It’s tough to prove yourself in just a year, but it’s better than not having the opportunity.”

**Building a Network**

In many ways, the fellowship is the final piece of the public-interest puzzle, giving recipients access not only to the experience but also to the relationships that enable them to leverage all their hard work into a long-term career.

“I think about Erin Whalen, who came here and wanted to do environmental law and did everything right,” Curry said. “She hooked up with the environmental law clinic, she did her summers in public interest, she networked. She did all the things she had to do, and because of that, she got the fellowship and a job with Earthjustice. But that was no guarantee that she would be able to get another environmental law job; they’re very hard to get. She knew she had to use that year and really distinguish herself—and she did. Still, the only opening they had was in Alaska. She’s from Florida! But she was committed, and the money follows the commitment with this program.”

It’s a perfect example, Curry added, of how the fellowship should, and does, work. It offers those with grit and determination the right support at exactly the right time.

That’s how it was for Jenni James, ’12, who came to the Law School sixteen years after graduating from college. James had started out in production at a local newspaper, volunteering on the side in a satellite office of the Marine Mammal Center in San Luis Obispo, California. Her work with animals moved her so much that she eventually quit her job to volunteer full time.

One day while rescuing a baby sea otter, she had an epiphany: the attorney with her was “the one asking all the smart questions.” Later, during a three-hour drive to the Monterey Bay Aquarium with the otter and the lawyer, she started asking questions. By the time they arrived in Monterey, the lawyer had convinced her to consider a career in law.

Fast forward to James’s third year at the Law School. She’d worked her 1L summer at the Environmental Defense Center and her 2L summer at the Animal Legal Defense Fund. She was hoping to return after graduation, but she couldn’t afford any more unpaid work, and the ALDF couldn’t afford to train a new attorney.

But then she won the fellowship: a win-win-win—for her, the ALDF, and a killer whale.

That year, she helped write a petition to have Lolita, a captive orca who is genetically related to a protected group off the coast of Washington, listed as endangered. The ALDF, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, and other groups submitted the petition in January 2013—and Lolita, who had been captured in August 1970, was listed this year. James hopes this will lead to improved conditions for Lolita and, eventually, a return to her natural habitat in the Puget Sound.

It was an inspiring year, and James wound up staying at ALDF a second year before leaving last fall for a job with the PETA Foundation. It’s been the ideal path—and one made possible by alumni donations.

“It’s amazing. I pinch myself every day,” James said. “I can’t believe how lucky I have been. I’ve had all these opportunities and the biggest one, really, was the fellowship money. Few people have the opportunity to learn a niche like this from a place like the Animal Legal Defense Fund. I went to the best possible law school, and then I went to the best possible place for my training. Now I work for the largest animal rights organization in the world.”

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**THE SIX POST-GRADUATE PUBLIC INTEREST FELLOWSHIPS**

- **The James and Patrice Comey Fellowship Fund**  
  (James, ’85, and Patrice Comey)

- **Barbara and Mark Fried Fund for Public Interest**  
  (Barbara Fried, ’57. The late Mark Fried graduated from the Law School in 1956.)

- **Mikva Fellowship Program Fund**  
  (The Kanter Family Foundation)

- **Lillian Kraemer Post-Graduate Public Interest Fund**  
  (Lillian Kraemer, ’64)

- **The Steve Marenberg and Alison Whalen Public Interest Fellowship Fund**  
  (Steven Marenberg, ’80, and Alison Whalen, ’82)

- **The Charlotte Von Hoene Fellowship Fund**  
  (William Von Hoene, ’80, and Nikki Zollar)