Challenging poverty through law: Exploring ways to make a difference

This spring, four very motivated Georgia Law students banded together to organize a comprehensive public interest law conference, believed to be the first of its kind in the southeastern United States, to explore practical approaches to lawyering that can best serve the underprivileged.

“The practical methods of challenging poverty are often not covered in traditional law school courses. This conference sought to remedy that and provide dynamic, creative ways to combat poverty through the vehicle of the law,” conference organizer and third-year law student Vanessa E. Volz said.

Titled Working in the Public Interest, the conference brought to Athens more than 500 eminent practitioners, faculty and students to discuss pertinent topics such as immigration, health care, homelessness, education, community economic development, indigent defense and government benefits. Headlining the event was former U.S. Sen. John Edwards, who delivered the keynote address. (The senator’s speech is covered on pages 4-6.)

The opening panel appropriately set the tone for WIPI conference dialogue, addressing the roles that lawyers do and should play in combating poverty.

Panelist Judith A. Browne of the Washington, D.C.-based non-profit The Advancement Project said her organization is focused on movement building. Browne said her group learned from the civil rights movement that litigation is most powerful in combination with organization and communication.

“Our theory of change is that change is going to happen at the grass roots and, if we have a movement of people, what lawyers can do is assist in that process,” Browne said.

Under The Advancement Project’s approach, lawyers take a secondary role, serving the needs of community members. “We believe that people know what they need and what they want, and that they need to speak for themselves. What lawyers can do is bring to the table the skills to get those things accomplished through things like litigation and policy work,” Browne said.

Executive Director of the Atlanta Legal Aid Society Steve Gottlieb said he feels a similar connection to the clients his organization serves. “My approach is that I want to make sure that I know what the needs of the people are who need our help.”

Gottlieb said his experience has shown him that lawyers provide the most help when they take the facts of an individual’s problem and make them into a broader statement of a problem that is faced by many people.

“The power that we have is to take our cases and to make them
into something more than the individual cases that they are.” Gottlieb then suggested accomplishing broad change through such avenues as legislation or the use of the media.

All of the panelists emphasized that exposure to real life situations is crucial to learning how to apply lawyering skills to the issue of poverty. Each recommended that students participate in clinical programs, internships and externships to build a foundation for public interest work.

Rounding out the 17 Saturday discussion panels was an opportunity to learn how public interest work interacts with employment opportunities at law firms. Panelists at the Public Interest Work in the Private Sector session represented large, mid-size and small firms. Each related the varied approaches his or her company applied to pro bono activities.

Each of the larger firms represented reported that structured pro bono programs are incorporated into the course of business. Jacqueline R. Knapp, an associate with Kilpatrick Stockton, discussed her firm’s two signature programs. The first initiative helps low-income tenants who do not get back their security deposits when they move by providing legal assistance in retrieving the money. The second program provides representation for grandparents who need help adopting their grandchildren.

In the past year, Knapp said she completed more than 200 hours of pro bono work. “I can’t impress upon young lawyers how useful it is to see these clients who need you so badly and who don’t care if you’re a first-year or second-year attorney or whether you are an experienced partner.”

The firm of Bondurant, Mixson & Elmore was represented by founding partner Emmet J. Bondurant II (LL.B.’60), who noted that his firm applies two rules to pro bono cases. First, attorneys at the firm who take pro bono cases must treat them with the same commitment as they would treat a case for a paying client. And second, attorneys who are working on pro bono cases have the full resources of the firm just as if they were working for any other client.

The small-firm approach to pro bono activity was relayed by Seth R. Cohen, a partner in the firm Smith, James, Rowlett & Cohen in North Carolina. Cohen also serves as general counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina and often speaks with pro bono clients who call with issues.

“Something that we do that is unusual is that we talk every day to everyday people who call and have a legal question,” Cohen said.

A lot of the questions Cohen addresses relate to employment issues, housing matters or complaints against the police. He said often people who call just need a few quick questions answered to give them peace of mind.

There are financial challenges to performing pro bono work at small firms where few attorneys are responsible for generating enough fees to support themselves and their staff, but Cohen said his firm is committed to continuing its public interest work. “We do it because it’s the right thing to do.”

Planning has already begun for the second Working in the Public Interest law conference. Judging by the strength of this year’s inaugural effort, the 2007 conference should be well worth attending.

Organizers of the inaugural Working in the Public Interest law conference were: (l. to r.) third-year students Vanessa Velez, Kelly James and Rakesh Parekh and second-year student Heidi Taylor.

Panelist Frances Ansley (left), University of Tennessee College of Law Distinguished Professor, poses for a photo with Tulane student Alexia Davis and Athens resident Keith Johnson.

At the conference, there was an art display in honor of the Olmstead decision. This ruling allowed persons with disabilities to move from institutions to community settings. All of the art featured was exhibited by artists in support of the conference’s mission.

Gregg DeMaria, a UGA graduate student from the education department, collaborates with Loyola student Kristine Carnesega about conference proceedings. The conference attracted students from as far away as Buffalo, N.Y.; Lansing, Mich.; New Orleans, La.; and the country of Wales.

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