THE DEAN'S CORNER

BY ASSISTANT DEAN KAREN L. KELLEY

All three programs run from the Center for Legal & Social Justice (“the CLSJ”) – the Clinical, Externship, and Pro Bono Programs – provide law students opportunities to gain practical legal skills – to put what they have been learning in the classroom to real life use.

Students work in wide variety of subject matters, depending on the site: housing, family law, immigration, criminal law, civil rights, consumer protection, health care, wills and estates, sports and entertainment, environmental regulation, education compliance, and many others. Students may work in our in-house clinics; in government, judicial, non-profit, or in-house counsel field placements; or alongside local attorneys volunteering their time and expertise with community pro bono projects.

In all of these settings, students engage in work building skills lawyers need on the job:

- interviewing, fact-finding, analyzing, writing, speaking, and persuading, but also;
- listening, empathizing, embracing feedback, learning by example and observation, relationship-building, time-management, reliability, work ethic, and professionalism.

Starting this past March, with the move, not only to remote instruction at the Law School, but also remote work at most workplaces resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, CLSJ program students were also presented with the necessity of developing the additional skills required to navigate successfully their remote work environments.

Despite the necessary restrictions, the summer remained a busy and productive one! This work included the creation of a housing hotline; training volunteer attorneys to handle jail bond hearings; and immigration trials proceeding without delay. Examples of positive results still achieved include:

- a client whose wrongful conviction was overturned after many years of advocacy;
- clients spared from eviction;
- a client released from immigration detention and reunited with his child from whom he had been separated for months.
Now, as the fall semester approaches, we are ready and eager to bring a new semester of students into these efforts! Determined that the education and skills training of this year’s class of students – and our service to the community – will not be thwarted. We have done what lawyers must do every day for their clients: we have problem-solved.

- We will provide the classroom instruction of the Clinical courses remotely. We will accomplish as much as possible of the casework remotely, as well. For now, Zoom hearings are the reality of practice for lawyers generally, and our Clinic students will learn how that is done!
- Our Externship sites are committed to allowing Externs to work remotely. Sixteen summer Externs completed a full summer of work in the field – and as many or more have lined up Externship placements for the fall semester.
- The Pro Bono Program and community partners have redesigned multiple pro bono projects to achieve their targeted assistance online.

This year, as in every other year, our CLSJ program students will leave here equipped with stronger skills and with a keen sense of their responsibility to help address the unmet legal needs in any community in which they may practice.

MARIANST GREEN AWARD FOR COMMUNITY SPIRIT & COOPERATION
2020 AWARD RECIPIENT
LESLEI ALVAREZ
How did the idea for the Housing Hotline develop?

COVID-19 put millions of Americans out of work, meaning they would not be able to afford basic expenses like rent, utilities, and food. We put together a team to brainstorm what St. Mary’s Law could do. Pro Bono Director Greg Zlotnick, Clinic Fellow Louyse Siegel, and Lizbeth Parra (JD ’19), a Housing Fellow with the University of Texas School of Law’s Entrepreneurship and Community Development Clinic, all took part. Since the Consumer Protection Clinic already focused on housing law and economic justice for low-income homeowners, we decided to leverage our expertise to help both renters and homeowners.

The hotline is a collaborative effort with St. Mary’s Law, UT Law, and Texas Rio Grande Legal Aid (TRLA). Because Lizbeth Parra is a UT Law Fellow working at the San Antonio office of TRLA, we were able to develop a streamlined referral process for callers who are in eviction proceedings. We give clients information about their housing issues, and refer them for financial assistance and legal representation, if needed.
What happens when people call the Housing Hotline?
The hotline is set up as a call-back hotline. Callers hear a message in English and Spanish, asking them to leave their name, number, and a short description of why they are calling. Within about 24 hours, an intake worker calls back to get basic information. Our summer intake workers, St. Mary’s Law students Rick Trevino, Katarina Kretz, and Rosa Peterson, have done a fantastic job, handling each call with compassion and skill. By August 1, they will have handled almost 300 calls. After the clinic legal assistant, Virginia Garcia, completes a quick conflict check, one of the attorneys reaches out to talk to the caller about their legal problem.

How do people find out about the Housing Hotline?
There is so much need in the San Antonio and South Texas community, but it’s always a challenge to get the word out. We have promoted the hotline on social media, reached out to the City Council and other governmental representatives, and done as many media interviews as possible.

Describe a typical call from the hotline.
Every call starts the same: “in mid-March or April, I lost my job. I haven’t been able to pay rent.” Each caller needs individual attention and has a unique story, but the common theme is a sudden loss of income. Housing law became a lot more complicated under COVID-19. The CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act) put a stop to evictions on federally-backed properties. The CARES Act also gave protections to homeowners with mortgages, student loan borrowers, and people with debts in collection. It takes a lot of expertise to know whether CARES Act protections apply to a property, or whether a caller might be able to access other local resources to save their housing.

How are clinic students going to be involved with the hotline this Fall?
I’m really excited for my eight clinic students to start in August, because they will be the ones conducting intakes, giving advice on the hotline, and taking some cases for representation. The hotline is an excellent opportunity for interaction with real clients, especially during a time when offices are closed and court hearings are on Zoom.
Students in the Family Law Clinic this semester, in addition to learning how to handle a family law case, learned how lawyers sometimes need to pivot and be able to adapt to any situation. Like all students, in March the family law clinic students had to take everything “online” except they also had to do that for client representation. They learned what it takes to operate from a virtual law office. Students continued to represent their clients in family law and estate planning matters throughout the Spring. Because of the uncertainty of when we could execute clients’ estate plan documents, students also had to suggest to their clients the creation of a holographic will and draft instructions on how to do so. Students in the family law clinic also had the opportunity this semester to work with the Immigration Clinic to represent a client jointly. The client was seeking asylum relief for herself and her three children. Her children were also eligible for immigration relief through a process called Special Immigrant Juvenile status, or “SIJ.” SIJ cases require an order in a Suit Affecting Parent-Child Relationship (also known as a “SAPCR”) from a civil district court. Immigration Student Attorney, Gabriel Saenz, worked with family law Student Attorney, Catrina Guerrero, and Teaching Assistant, Aisha Denis, to prepare the client for a Zoom trial in the SAPCR matter.
Daniel is one of the most inspiring people I have ever met. After being brutally tortured at the hands of government actors and forced to escape or risk death, Daniel fled his home country of Guinea and traveled to the U.S. After a long dangerous journey, he arrived at a point of entry on the southern border, and seeking protection, asked U.S. immigration officials for asylum. He was immediately detained and transferred to the detention center in Pearsall, Texas. There, Daniel sent a handwritten letter to the CLSJ asking for legal representation. At the start of fall semester 2017, I was assigned to his case as a 2L and my partner and I worked all semester to prepare him and his case for court.

Since the beginning of 2019, tens of thousands of asylum seekers have been processed under the Remain in Mexico program, which requires applicants to wait in Mexico for hearings to apply for asylum. The Immigration and Human Rights Clinic responded to the call from organizations on the ground in Matamoros, Mexico to provide critical remote assistance to asylum seekers. Students prepared asylum applications, drafted declarations, gathered and translated evidence, and provided counsel and advice about navigating a complex and changing system.

The day of the hearing arrived and a few hours later, the immigration judge granted asylum to Daniel. He broke down crying, happy to have been granted relief but also to soon be freed from detention. Once released, he thrived. One year later, he was eligible to apply for lawful permanent residency. This time as a 3L, I prepared Daniel’s adjustment of status application. In December 2018, his application was filed with USCIS. In July 2020, this time as a Clinical Fellow, I had the honor of informing Daniel that his application was approved and that he was now a lawful permanent resident of the United States. Throughout this process, Daniel was kind and great to work with. When papers needed to be signed, he came to the CLSJ with a big smile and always wanted to take the IHRC team to lunch. Despite everything he has been through in his life, he remains positive and hopeful. He has plans to marry, and with his LPR status, hopes to bring his wife to the United States so they can build a life together.
In early 2020, the clinic partnered with Bexar County officials in the implementation of 48-hour bond hearings for the indigent criminally accused. This was one of the clinic’s projects aimed at addressing and resolving disparate treatment of individuals based on their race and economic status. Since the purpose of bond is to ensure a defendant’s appearance in court and compliance with the rules of release, it should not be, but often functions as a form of financial oppression and discrimination of the poor and marginalized. The purpose of these speedy bail hearings (within 48 hours of arrest) is to provide assistance for indigent defendants to get out of jail pending their trials with either a no-cost personal recognizance (PR) bonds, or an affordable bond. In spring, both the rampant spread of COVID-19 in the jail, and the Governor’s order disallowing PR bonds for inmates currently arrested for, or who had previously been convicted of, a charge of violence or attempted violence, urgently elevated the need for speedy bail hearings. Clinic attorneys not only worked with officials to implement the hearings, but trained the local bar on representation at the hearings, and have themselves volunteered as bail hearing attorneys for over twenty defendants during Covid-19.
What is an Externship?
Externship is a course that adds value to a real-world work experience through the reflection and discussions in what is often their first professional work setting. Externs learn “on the job” in a field placement and complete a curriculum focused on their professional development.

Why should I consider an Externship during Law School?
An Externship will ensure you build legal skills and increase your knowledge, but there are other tools offered in the curriculum that optimize the real-world experience.

Practice Self-Directive Traits
The curriculum provides Externs a chance to practice setting and tracking goals, communicating and collaborating with their supervisors to ensure they receive challenging work and concrete feedback. The curriculum encourages Externs to figure out when and how to reach out for help, identifying when it’s time to pivot, and how to start over after a setback.

Explore Legal Areas/Offices
If you are interested in a certain area of law or office type (government vs. nonprofit vs. private), Externship provides a great opportunity to explore in a supportive educational environment. Yes, you can still set goals centered around specific legal skills and knowledge, but the curriculum encourages you to reflect on whether the work and environment fit your future professional goals/needs.

Build Support Systems
Support systems are useful professional development tools. The Externship curriculum facilitates creating and/or adding to your peer, coaching, and/or personal support systems.

“I appreciated the structure of the course. It was very helpful to have the periodic reflection and discussion and to bring work experience into the academic setting.”
Camilla Morrison, Fall 2019
The ID Recovery Program is operating remotely, assisting individuals experiencing homelessness in obtaining identifying documents.

With the extension of the filing deadline to July 15, the VITA team, in consultation with our School of Business partners, developed a remote tax preparation program focused on international students.

With the San Antonio Legal Services Association, law students have provided remote assistance to a project providing advance planning services to frontline workers at University Health System and Christus Health.

Law students have volunteered with Lone Star Legal Aid on a new pro bono project drafting advance planning documents for remote clients—primarily veterans and senior citizens.

Ongoing collaborations with Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, the largest legal aid provider in Texas, have also moved online. With the assisted pro se divorce workshop, law students remotely drafted final orders for pro se workshop participants. With TRLA's mental health team, law students have trained and staffed virtual psychiatric advance directive workshops, conducting intakes and drafting documents.

And, in May, law students worked with attorneys from Disability Rights Texas, SALSA, and TRLA to prepare guardianship alternative documents.

"I AM GRATEFUL TO HAVE WORKED ON THE ID RECOVERY TEAM THIS SUMMER. THROUGH THE PANDEMIC, IT HAS BEEN SUCH A REWARDING OPPORTUNITY TO HELP INDIVIDUALS. COLLABORATING WITH HAVEN FOR HOPE TO CONNECT WITH CLIENTS OVER THE PHONE HAS SHOWN ME HOW TO ADAPT CLIENT INTERVIEWING IN A VIRTUAL SETTING."

TOMÁS RIVERA, SUMMER 2020
CLASS NOTES:

“DOING [MY CLIENT’S] DIRECT EXAMINATION WAS A VERY EMPOWERING MOMENT FOR ME. IT MADE ME REALIZE NOT ONLY THAT I AM CAPABLE, BUT SPEAKING IN COURT IS NOT AS INTIMIDATING AS I ONCE THOUGHT IT WAS.”

—FERNANDO BAEZA, 3L

“[OUR CLIENTS] BECAME COMFORTABLE WITH US BECAUSE WE WEREN’T COMPLETELY MECHANICAL AND DIDN’T COME OFF AS EMOTIONLESS…. SINCE WE WERE ABLE TO GAIN THEIR TRUST FROM THE START IT WAS A LOT EASIER TO OBTAIN THE INFORMATION WE REQUIRED.”

—VALERIA MONTALVO (JD ’20)

“I AM GRATEFUL FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE BEEN A LEGAL EXTERN AT EASY EXPUNGENCES. … I HAVE LEARNED SO MUCH ABOUT EXPUNGEMENT LAWS FROM REID AND OUR WORK TOGETHER. … I AM GLAD THAT THE EXTERN CLASS GAVE ME THE RESOURCES TO ENHANCE MY RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM BY MAKING ONE OF MY LEARNING GOALS THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN FROM HIS WISDOM AND EXPERIENCE. … [IT] PROVIDES ME WITH THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP PROFESSIONAL SKILLS AND LAWYERING ABILITIES.”

—ANKIT SAGGI (JD ’20)
"As the first fellow in the Consumer Protection Clinic funded by the Texas Access to Justice Foundation, I have worked with a fabulous team to help tenants who are facing eviction due to circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. These tenants are often uninformed of their rights and their options. They are scared and often so thankful even when all we are able to do for them is to explain the process. We were able to get an eviction dismissed, via zoom, in a case where the landlord was misrepresenting whether he had received payment. If the client had not been able to call us, he would have had an eviction on his record and a large judgment against him that he did not actually owe."

"After working on a client’s debt collection case, I now realize how debt reports, even false ones, stack the odds against a low-income client. An apartment complex reported an erroneous balance to a collection firm, the balance went on her credit report, and the report kept her from being able to move to a new apartment. If our client did not know to reach out to the Consumer Protection Clinic, that debt would surely still be on her record, and our client may not have gotten the help she desperately needed."