

Public Service by Law Students



BY PROFESSOR PAMELA H. BUCY AND JUDGE JOHN L. CARROLL



Allison Alford Ingram presents the Volunteer Lawyers Program Student Award at the October 2006 Admission Ceremony.

The woman, now in her twenties, attends class, works daily in an office, and loves to read. She hopes to be a journalist someday. The woman is considerate and gracious, and makes an effort to help her visitor feel at ease. That's not an easy feat since the woman is hosting her visitor from an Alabama prison where she is serving a term of life without parole. The woman was convicted for aiding and abetting her boyfriend in the murder of her grandfather and aunt, and for stabbing her sister when she was 14 years old. Interviewing the woman is a University of Alabama law student¹ who served as a summer intern with Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) during the summer 2006. EJI is a private, nonprofit organization in Montgomery that provides legal representation to indigent defendants and prisoners.

What did this law student think about meeting her chronological peer on death

row? "I saw that individuals may do bad things but they are not monsters. And, it made me more optimistic about human nature because I met someone who was full of hope." What did this student learn from her summer internship? "I saw how lawyers deal with situations when all the law and the facts are against you. It also helped me find out what a good job would be like. A good job is having an impact on something important. My EJI internship affirmed that, yes, I like the law." Does this student hope to take a public interest law job after she graduates from law school? "I would like to but I have \$70,000 in debt. I don't know if I'll be able to."

Another University of Alabama law student, Rick Pohlsander, during an Elder Law clinical course during his second year of law school, saw firsthand the advantage of using the Tuscaloosa County Probate Records' office computerized system over its antiquated filing system. Pohlsander

recruited other UA law students to volunteer their time to computerize the remaining probate court files. Since early fall 2006, these students have been scanning court files one by one; they expect to be finished by September 2007.

Along with ten other University of Alabama law students, Pohlsander also regularly visits residents at area nursing homes as a volunteer. The students talk to the residents to see if their needs are being met, and listen to their stories. It's an enlightening process. One student spoke of walking into a resident's room and being greeted by a foul odor, and even fouler language.

Why does Pohlsander do such public service, especially while a busy law student? "My education here is a bargain. I wanted to give something back to the state." What are Pohlsander's plans after law school? "I'm going back home. There are only seven attorneys in my county. I'm going to hang a shingle."

During the fall of 2006, more than 80 University of Alabama law students volunteered to help Katrina victims. Coordinated by UA Law Professor **Bob Kuehn** and Tuscaloosa attorney **Cooper Shattuck** of Rosen, Cook, Sledge, Shattuck & Oldshue, law students assisted over 100 Katrina victims. The students met people who had lost everything, people who didn't want to go back, and people who wanted to but couldn't because there was nothing left. Most of the Katrina victims' legal questions concerned insurance: Do I have insurance? What does it cover? Who do I call? What do I do when no one calls me back?

Emily Hines, a second-year UA law student, was one of the Katrina volunteers. She recalls as one of the more memorable individuals she met a man who, months after Katrina hit, was still searching for his sister and her family. He didn't know where his sister was or where she had gone, and he didn't know how to find her. There were some surprises. As Emily recalls, the FEMA people were very nice. And, she saw, Mississippi was hurt worse than parts of New Orleans but didn't seem to get as much sympathy, maybe, Emily surmised, because of media attention focused on New Orleans. Emily watched how differently hurricane victims responded to the catastrophe. She saw that some went out looking for jobs

right away, found them and began rebuilding their lives. Others wanted laws to take care of them.

Each semester, UA law students volunteer at the **Tuscaloosa Community Soup Bowl** for homeless persons. In September 2006, law students bought and cooked food, and served over 550 homeless persons for Saturday and Sunday lunches. According to one volunteer, who describes the Soup Bowl as her favorite volunteer experience since entering law school, "The people are so appreciative. It is so much fun. You go to Sam's and buy the huge portions, then cook. It's very humbling. Very leveling. The person who is first in the class will be there in the kitchen saying, 'Uh, how do you cook this stuff?'"

Public interest summer internships and outreach to the community are just some of the programs coordinated through UA Law School's Public Interest Institute. Created in 2000, the Institute builds upon the longstanding tradition of service by the law school's students, graduates and faculty. Notably, in 2000, the year the Institute was created, 24 of the 25 existing UA Law School student organizations sponsored at least one public service activity. One of the Institute's activities is an annual **Speakers Series**. Prior speakers have included Millard Fuller, founder of Habitat for Humanity (UA Law '60); Morris Dees, founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center (UA Law '61); Derrick Crawford, legal counsel, National Football League (UA Law '90); and Bryan Stevenson, director of Equal Justice Initiative.

The Institute also sponsors the **Dean's Community Service Award** and **Order of Samaritan**. Order of Samaritan is UA Law School's highest public interest award and is bestowed on those law students who obtain both the Dean's Community Service, which is earned through community service, and the **Volunteer Lawyers Program (VLP) Student Award**, which is awarded by the Alabama State Bar for work in the VLP.

Additionally, the Institute awards summer fellowships to law students who do public interest law internships. Since 1992, the law school has awarded over 150 summer fellowships to UA law students. These summer internship placements have included Legal Aid of Birmingham, Legal Services Corporation, Public Defender



offices, U.S. Attorney's offices, the Alabama Department of Environmental Management, the Southern Environmental Law Center in Washington, the Georgia Center for Law in the Public Interest, the Alabama office of the American Civil Liberties Union, the Nature Conservancy, the University of Berkeley Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, the National Labor Relations Board, Equal Justice Center's Poultry Workers Project, and the office of a United States Senator.

Through the Institute, law students provide **literacy tutoring** for elementary children at Tuscaloosa housing developments, conduct a "Work-A-Day" each semester in which law students paint houses, clean up trash and work on **Habitat for Humanity** homes, and present a **mock trial** at area middle schools.

Lastly, each year the Public Interest Institute sponsors the **Michael A. Figures Law & Leadership Forum** at the Law School. Teenagers from Chilton County are selected by their teachers to attend this forum. It begins with an awards luncheon in their honor. The 2006 keynote speaker was **Christopher England**, an '02 UA Law School graduate and newly elected state representative to the Alabama legislature. The teens then participate as jurors in an eight-hour mock trial conducted by law students. **Elizabeth Humphrey Huntley**, UA Law '97, created this forum in honor of Michael Figures, elected lieutenant governor of Alabama, who was one of the first African-Americans to graduate from the UA School of Law.

Tari Williams, director of the Public Interest Institute, summed up the UA Law School's view about public service by lawyers: "Public interest isn't what you do, it's who you are. Lawyers serve the public interest by working for fairness."

Samford University's Cumberland School of Law, like the University of Alabama School of Law, seeks to foster a commitment to serving the public in its students. Under the umbrella of the **Cumberland Public Interest Project**, the school works to provide an understanding of the lawyer's duty to serve the community through a wide variety of programs.

The **Cumberland Community Service Organization (CSO)** is the student organization dedicated to public interest projects with the Cumberland Community and the community at large. The CSO begins its work during 1L orientation. The Friday of orientation week is devoted to public interest and public service. Members of the Alabama State Bar address the students and discuss the importance of public interest and public service. The afternoon is devoted

to participation in community service projects at places like **Urban Ministries** and the **Alabama Wildlife Center** at Oak Mountain State Park. The CSO then begins a year-long program of community service opportunities for students.

During the fall, CSO coordinates work on a Habitat for Humanity house. Before Thanksgiving, the CSO sponsors a canned food and clothing drive to benefit Birmingham Urban Ministries. In the spring, CSO participates in the YWCA flower sale which benefits **KidsKorner**, the YWCA childcare program for children whose families reside in area shelters for the homeless and undertakes its largest project, the **CSO Easter Egg Hunt**. The Easter egg hunt brings literally hundreds of children sponsored by various agencies in the Birmingham area to the Samford University campus. This year's event, for example, assisted children sponsored by **Big Brothers** and **Big Sisters**, the **Salvation Army**, **Urban Ministries**, **Children's Village** and the **YWCA**. For students, this is the favorite event of the year. As one student volunteer remarked, there is nothing in law school to compare to the smiles that they see as children who are often forgotten or ignored by society enjoy



a day devoted to them. The Community Services Organization also sponsors a yearly job fair which brings public interest employers to the law school.

CSO also provides opportunities when special needs arise. When 11 students from **Tulane** and **Loyola** came to Cumberland in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the CSO assisted to make sure that their needs were met. The CSO also raised \$2,700 for victims of the hurricane which was then matched by Compass Bank for a total of \$5,400. The organization also helped facilitate the placement of an **Alabama Legal Services Call Center** at the law school to help victims of Hurricane Katrina with legal problems. Cumberland students also did volunteer work to assist Katrina victims housed at the Birmingham Jefferson Civic Center and some participated in the **Common Ground Katrina Relief** effort during spring break 2006.

Other student organizations at Cumberland add to the efforts of the Community Services Organization. Both the **Women in Law** and the **Black Law Students Association** maintain active community service volunteer programs. The Black Law Students Association, for example, sponsored an "Eat Well, Test Well" program for students at Glen Iris Elementary School. By collecting breakfast food items, the BLSA students were able to provide breakfasts to students in the 3rd, 4th and 5th grades on standardized testing days. The Women in Law organization also collects used children's books to be distributed to needy grammar schools in the area at Christmas time.

Students from Cumberland also participate in the **VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Project)**. Through that project, Cumberland students prepare income tax returns for low-income individuals. In 2003, the American Bar Association named the Cumberland initiative the best new VITA project in the country.

The **Center for Law & Civic Education**, a nationally recognized entity housed at the Cumberland School of Law, also provides significant public service opportunities for Cumberland students. The most popular program is the **Street Law** program where Cumberland students are trained to teach juvenile law and then are assigned to teach classes in the Jefferson County and Birmingham public schools.

Over 70 students participated in the **Street Law** project this past year. Cumberland students also participate in the **Teen Court Program** sponsored by the Center. Teen Court is a division of the Jefferson County Family Court created for first-time juvenile offenders charged with non-violent crimes and are represented and prosecuted by teen attorneys before a jury of their peers. Cumberland students assist the teen litigators in preparing their cases.

There are two other projects now underway which are also sponsored by the Cumberland Public Interest Law project which will be available online this spring. The first is the **Julia Tutwiler Prison Education Project**. Cumberland students and faculty will be teaching basic law classes to inmates at the Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women. The second is the **Cumberland Community Mediation Center**. Students who have completed the mediation practice course will be utilized to resolve community disputes in cases where the parties are unable to afford the services of a paid mediator.

Cumberland honors its students who have done public interest work through the **Spirit of Service Award** which recognizes students who have contributed 30 hours of pro bono or public interest work. The most important award is the **Dean's Public Interest Award** which is given annually to the Cumberland student who best exemplifies a commitment to public interest and community service.

The law school also sponsors public interest externships, internships and volunteer opportunities for students to work with public interest organizations. In addition, the law school, through the generosity of its alumni and the **Henry U. Sims Foundation**, offers summer stipends for students who engage in public interest work during the summer. These stipends have helped fund placements with **New York City Legal Aid**, the **Federal Judicial Center in Washington**, **Jefferson County Family Court**, the **YWCA Domestic Violence Project**, the **Civil Rights Division at the United States Department of Justice**, **Black Warrior Riverkeepers**, the **Chicago Cook County and District of Columbia public defender offices** and various other state prosecution and defense agencies. It is these opportunities to work in a real world

environment that provides an insight into the importance of public interest law that no classroom can provide.

Eddie Koen is a third-year student at Cumberland with a passion for criminal defense work. It is not surprising that he has pursued opportunities which fuel that passion. Following his first year at the law school, Eddie worked for the **Cook County Public Defenders Office** in Chicago. Last summer he worked again for a public defender organization, this time in the District of Columbia. Eddie also acts as a student volunteer working with the Chicago law firm of **Skadden & Arps**, assisting lawyers from that firm with Alabama death penalty cases.

Much of the work which Eddie has done with the defender organizations replicated the experience of most summer law clerks. He wrote memoranda on legal issues, conducted interviews and attended hearings and trials. His most important learning, however, occurred through his interaction with the public defender's clients both on the street and in jail. It was this important contact with persons, always low-income and almost always minority that has increased Eddie's desire to enter public interest work. In Eddie's words, "Pursuing a career in public interest will help fulfill the goal that most law students put in their personal admissions statement. I want to become a lawyer to help people."

Allison Case, another third-year student at Cumberland, pursued her interest in a facet of the criminal justice system different from Eddie. Allison did volunteer internships with the **United States Attorney's Office** in Birmingham and the **Alabama Attorney General's Office**. Allison's experience was again similar to other summer law clerks. While at the U.S.

Attorney's office, Allison wrote memos on a wide variety of topics from search-and-seizure issues to gun control and assisted in the drafting of a brief for the United States Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit. At the Attorney General's office, she worked in the criminal appeals section and assisted in the preparation of briefs.

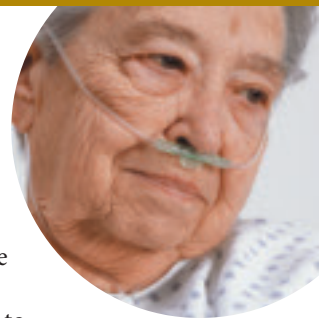
For Allison, the work was a reaffirming experience. In her words, the experiences with the United States Attorney's office and the Alabama Attorney General's office "affirmed my belief that a government attorney can actually benefit the lives of others by providing me a direct view of the relationships between the legal systems and its citizens." She also noted that, "I grasped how prosecutors maintain the dual role of being protectors of society and the voice of society at large."

Stephanie Crenshaw, a 2006 Cumberland graduate and now a member of the Alabama State Bar, volunteered for work as a court advocate with the **YWCA Legal Advocacy Program of Central Alabama** while she was in law school. Her principal job was interviewing victims of domestic violence. She also worked supporting victims in **Jefferson County Family Court** and **Homewood Municipal Court**. For Stephanie, the job was a tremendous educational experience. She came in contact with women from all walks of life, some in similar situations and others in very different situations. Sometimes the cases involved spouses or couples who were dating. These cases included men who abused women but also women who abused men. Other cases involved parents and children. There was a father who attacked his adult daughter and an adult daughter who attacked her mother.

The experience was an outstanding one according to Stephanie, which not only exposed her to the victims of domestic violence but to lawyers and judges who work in the field. The opportunity to interact with clients was invaluable. Nonetheless, the experience was sobering. In her words, "I was amazed at how much domestic violence is in the world, every day. This is an epidemic that is not publicized."

Lastly, **Latonia Williams**, a second-year student at Cumberland, had what she describes as a life-changing experience while working in the housing division of **Legal Services of Metro Birmingham** where she assisted in the representation

of clients in eviction proceedings. She learned that working in the public interest means "not only working to help those who do not have the finances or resources to help themselves but also means protecting them from the people who seek to take advantage of them because of their situation." Latonia recalls a case where the landlord refused to make repairs to a home that was falling apart, not because he did not have the resources but because he knew that the tenant had no where else to go and nowhere to turn. The landlord knew that the tenant's options were to stay in the rundown home and continue to pay rent or to stay on the streets. What Latonia learned while working for Legal Services is something that she will always take with her. In her words, "When you can stand up for the 'little people' and stand up to the 'big people,' it feels like you are making the justice system do the justice that people deserve." ■



Endnotes

1. The law student's name is not provided in this article to preserve the identity of the client.



Professor Pamela H. Bucy
Pamela H. Bucy is the Bainbridge Professor of Law at the University of Alabama School of Law. She is a member of the Board of Bar Commissioners and has served on the Alabama State Bar's Committee on Access to Legal Services.



Judge John L. Carroll
Judge Carroll is dean and Ethel P. Malugen Professor of Law at the Cumberland School of Law, Samford University, Birmingham. Judge Carroll served as a United States Magistrate Judge in the Middle District of Alabama for over 14 years. He received his undergraduate degree from Tufts University and holds law degrees from the Cumberland School of Law at Samford University (J.D.) (*magna cum laude*) and Harvard University (LL.M.).

