

Serving the Poor in Court



Cavise and Valenzuela

An immigrant sits in jail in Juneau, Wis., miles away from his family. A woman with no job skills tries to survive domestic violence in Chicago. A family in North Carolina fears losing their home because of a mortgage scam.

Public interest lawyers trained in DePaul's College of Law can tell you no end of painful stories about the marginalized people they serve. But there are victories, too, as these lawyers and their clients work to create social justice.

The DePaul Center for Public Interest Law is a vibrant resource for the growing number of students who want to practice pro bono and public interest law. The center is also a resource for alumni working in the field. Established in 2006, the center "formalizes a very long tradition of public service at DePaul," says Leonard L. Cavise, professor of law and director of the center.

"I predated the center, but I still saw the values here," says Shaye Loughlin (LAW '06) who is the center's associate director. "I always thought that DePaul had a public service/public interest reputation as part of its Vincentian mission, and I knew that many public officials—the public guardian, the mayor—went to DePaul. I saw the courses, I saw the Public Interest Law Association where the students were involved in these issues and in the programming."

It was students—four of them—who initially came to three of the law faculty to ask for a center. The center is still primarily student-driven. Its committee includes 20 students and seven faculty members—not including the many other students, alumni, faculty and staff who are involved in the center's numerous activities.

Students at the center also created the DePaul Journal for Social Justice. Jennifer Keys (LAW '08), who worked as a journalist prior to law school and clerks for Judge Ann Claire Williams of the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, is one of the journal's four founders. Keys says that as soon as they presented the idea, it had immediate support. "When you come to [Cavise] and tell him you want to do something in whatever capacity for public interest, he will find a way, he will be your biggest advocate, he will be your cheerleader, he will get you the money."

"Twenty years ago, students who were interested in public service had to look around to see if there was anybody else like them, and they had to look to see if there were professors like me who were like them. Now you don't have to do that," says Cavise. "Now the public interest students have their own legal writing section. And when they go to our events they see all these people and they say, 'OK, that's my community.' So they're no longer timid about saying, 'OK, I'm going to serve the poor.'"

George Hausen (LAW '88), who is now executive director of Legal Aid of North Carolina, was one of those students. From a blue-collar family with parents who didn't graduate from high school, Hausen went to law school at night and worked at the Cabrini Green Legal Aid Clinic in the daytime after his first year of law school.

After passing the bar exam, Hausen served three years in the Peace Corps in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. "I never intended to practice law," he says. "I wanted to do community work." After that, he worked for the Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights and then the Lawyer's Committee for Better Housing, becoming a litigator who does community work.

Hausen is proud of his experience at DePaul. "They really prepared me to do anything. I can litigate anywhere, and have," he says. In his present position, which involves running a statewide organization with 24 offices, he sees—and hires—lawyers from the highest-caliber law programs. "The experience I had at DePaul measures up with all the experiences and talents that I see today," he says.

Kendra Reinshagen (LAW '79) became involved in rape crisis and domestic violence work in the 1970s and chose DePaul's College of Law because of its Vincentian and social justice values. Today, she is executive director of the Legal Aid Bureau of Metropolitan Family Services, where she oversees attorneys in the organization's Domestic

Violence, Elder Law and Poverty Law projects. Like most people who choose this path, she says, "I was never in it for the money. I knew I wanted to work with people and to help people," she says.

Though the work has its rewards, it is hard and emotionally draining. "Being a public interest lawyer in this day and age is tough. It's tough law for the poor; the law is so harsh on uneducated poor communities," says Claudia Valenzuela (LAW '02), managing attorney for the Adult Detention Project for the National Immigrant Justice Center, a program of Heartland Alliance. She works on the legal cases of immigrants in detention and oversees staff and volunteers who educate detainees about their rights.

Valenzuela says her work is heartbreaking not only because of the stories she hears about every day, but because of the monumental inefficiencies in the immigration system. All the more reason, she says, she appreciates the continuing "wealth of mentorship and support" from her former DePaul professors. And, like many of her colleagues, she worries about the private loans she took out to finance her education. She and her husband have a 1-year-old daughter, and "it was difficult enough when I was single," she says.

Unlike lawyers who earn enough in lucrative corporate or private practices to take care of the cost of their legal education, public interest lawyers have to figure out how to make ends meet and pay off their loans on a salary that usually starts around \$40,000 per year. DePaul's College of Law, like many others, has law loan repayment assistance programs to help law graduates with lower-paying public sector jobs manage their debts. The college also awards partial and full-tuition benefits to students with outstanding academic records and a demonstrated commitment to public interest law as part of the Public Interest Honors Scholars.

Despite the low salaries, says Cavise, students gravitate toward public interest law and pro bono work. He attributes that to "the bankruptcy of a professional life where all you're trying to do is make money" and points out that current national studies indicate that more than half of prospective law school students put social values at the top of their agenda. "We are drawing top scholars from all over the country," he says.

Hausen says that public interest lawyers shouldn't be applauded for choosing work at a starting salary that is lower than it would be in another type of practice. "You do this work because you're filled with passion for the social justice aspect of it."