Chancellor’s Scholars Launch Pledge for the Public Good

The Pledge for the Public Good, just recently launched, resulted from a year-long collaborative effort between students and faculty. It is a call from students that encourages faculty to make explicit connections to public interest issues within the classroom, stoking the passions that many students bring to law school.

Recognizing the University of Denver Sturm College of Law’s strong emphasis on cultivating students’ professional identities, we believe it is necessary to understanding the moral implications of our future roles as legal advocates—especially within the framework of traditional 1L courses. The Pledge asks faculty to begin to address these issues by choosing one of three suggested methods (a public interest lecture, explicit case connections, or hosting a public interest guest speaker), or develop their own method to implement throughout the semester. With a view toward the University of Denver’s mission—"a great private university dedicated to the public good"—we, the students, called for dedication to fostering public interest consciousness and comprehensive development of students’ professional identities.

The Pledge was supported by over twenty student groups. 2015-2016 is the first year of Pledge’s implementation. Nearly 60 professors have agreed to implement the Pledge during this school year. We are excited to see what they do!

—Ashley Basta, 3L, Haley DiRenzo, 2L, Mia Kontnik, 2L & Katie Steefel, 2L

The Public Service Newsletter highlights events, people and issues related to public service and the law.

Visit the Public Service Portal for information on future events.

Public Interest Career Fair at DU!

Don’t forget! On November 10, over 60 public interest groups, including nonprofits and government agencies, will be at Denver Law for the annual career fair. All students are encouraged to attend to meet prospective externship supervisors and permanent employers. This is a great opportunity to have “face time” with many members of the Denver Metro public interest legal community.

For a list of participating groups, visit Symplicity or contact the Public Sector Career Advisors in the Office of Career Development & Opportunities—Andrea Montague, John McKee and Judy Stein.
The Campaign to Save Loan Forgiveness

The Law Student Division of the American Bar Association has recently launched an advocacy campaign, Save #Loan4Giveness. The campaign is focused on spreading the word about the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program and preserving it for the future.

The campaign materials paint a fairly bleak picture of the future of PSLF but it does provide a complete picture of where PSLF currently stands. In recent years, there have been proposals put forward to limit or eliminate the PSLF program in both Congress and the President’s budget, which gives the program an uncertain future. However, it is highly unlikely that any changes would affect current borrowers. It would be unprecedented for Congress to eliminate benefits such as those available through PSLF without grandfathering in existing borrowers. While benefits for current borrowers are not likely to be affected, raising awareness of the benefits of the PSLF program is still important to make sure that the program exists for a future generation of public interest attorneys.

If you are interested in taking part in this new campaign, you can obtain additional information at www.ambar.org/Loan4Giveness. You can get additional information about the effect of these potential changes through the Ask Heather Jarvis blog and the Student Loan Ranger blog. Additional questions can be directed to Kasia Palm in the Office of Student Financial Management at FinancialManagement@law.du.edu or 303.871.6557.

–Director of Student Financial Services Kasia Palm

Lawyering for the Public Good Event Fosters Connections, Community & Careers

More than 50 students devoted their Friday evening and Saturday to attend Lawyering for the Public Good: A Gathering of Denver Law Students Devoted to Justice. The event provided a space for students to learn how to use their legal degree to advance the public good. It began Friday evening with keynote speaker Purvi Shah of the Center for Constitutional Rights, who spoke of her own experience working in Ferguson after Mike Brown’s death. Shah ignited the passion of the students in the audience, urging us to run to the fire of where justice is needed and to utilize our three years in law school to hone every skill we can. She reminded students of the motto, “High impact, low ego,” which she truly demonstrated throughout her presentation.

During the day-long event on Saturday, public interest attorneys from the Denver legal community spoke on panels facilitated by Denver Law faculty. Four different panels demonstrated various ways to use legal degrees for the public good: individual representation, movement and cause lawyering, government work and policy advocacy. These sessions allowed students to see a wide range of potential careers and to make connections with attorneys. In addition to the panels, Saturday’s event included information about public interest resources at the law school, faculty and student speakers and student community building. The community building session and happy hour at the end of the day helped foster a network of passionate Denver Law students. The event opened the eyes of many students regarding the many different public interest careers available and also strengthened the public interest community already thriving at Denver Law. Watch videos from the event online.

–Katie Steefel, 2L
The Seeds & Strategy of Learning to be a Lawyer

My fingers are coated with sap as I peel back the corners of a pinecone, revealing the trove of small brown nuts that promise a savory and prized roasted snack. It is harvest season in Piñon, a small town on the Navajo Nation named for the warped but resilient pine trees under which we are crouched. Marshall Johnson is searching for nuts alongside me; he grew up on the reservation and shows me how soft red sand works like flour to neutralize the stickiness. As I move my hands through the dirt, he teaches me the Navajo words for ‘My Mother, Earth.’ “It’s good you learn this now,” Marshall says with a chuckle. “That’s what you’ll be saving.”

I traveled with my co-student attorneys, Shannon Hughes and Mallory Kindsfather, our clinical professor, Brad Bartlett, and Environmental Law Clinic Fellow, Tim Estep, to northeastern Arizona during the second week of September. As students in the Environmental Law Clinic, we were there to meet our clients. Between the harvest and strategy meetings, we spent time over meals learning about the challenges and goals of their organizations. Nicole Horseherder and Marshall Johnson of To’ Nizhoni Ani (“Beautiful Water Speaking”) and Jihan Gearon of the Black Mesa Water Coalition are residents and activists working for environmental justice and a “just transition” to clean energy on the Navajo Nation. These community-based groups seek to educate and empower the Diné (what the Navajo people call themselves) to advocate for the air, water, and land that is sacred and necessary to the wellbeing of their communities. We are helping TNA and the BMWC in the fight surrounding the Navajo Generating Station. As the largest and dirtiest coal plant in the United States, NGS takes coal from the sacred Black Mesa—considered the female deity of the Navajo Nation—and burns it to provide power to customers in Arizona, Nevada and California. The power plant causes respiratory disease on the reservation while most Diné live without running water or electricity.

The case we are working on is about government accountability. Learning from Nicole, Marshall and Jihan, I quickly realized that although it is a distinct and sovereign entity, the Navajo Nation’s government is modeled after the federal government of the United States and is thus woven with similar possibilities and limitations. Just as the federal government does not always represent the interests of the states or individual citizens, neither has the Navajo Nation nor the U.S. EPA been helpful in furthering our clients’ vision for a sustainable economy. We are pursuing every avenue to support these grassroots tribal organizations in holding both governments accountable.

Between the sap of piñon harvest season, the pollution from NGS, and the endlessly technical provisions of the Clean Air Act sits To’ Nizhoni Ani, the Black Mesa Water Coalition, and the communities they represent. Our journey to the high desert underscored the appreciation for place and people that is so central to effective and responsible environmental advocacy. Through the Environmental Law Clinic, we are learning and practicing environmental justice litigation—a labor that is as messy as it is fertile for long-awaited change.

–Ashley Basta, 3L
PILG Clerkship Awardees Share Summer Experiences

This past spring, PILG’s annual fundraising efforts raised enough money to provide support to 10 Denver Law students engaged in public interest work during summer 2015. Below, a few of those awardees share their experiences. To get involved in PILG and its fundraising efforts, contact Sarah Flinn, president, at sflinn17@law.du.edu.

Western Environmental Law Center
I wanted to work with WELC because of their focus on natural resource development in the southwest, most specifically around methane emissions and climate change. Additionally, WELC works with tribal community groups to protect their communities and environment. I reviewed federal land management agencies planning documents and assisted in drafting comments on these documents. My work this summer reinforced my desire to work directly with tribal communities and assist in addressing their environmental concerns. One particularly impactful part of the summer was attending a strategy meeting among a large group of southwestern public interest environmental groups regarding methane emissions. The experience highlighted the power of collaboration and the need for such collaboration when tackling problems like methane emissions, a greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change.

–Lauren Bushong, 3L

Chilean National Prosecutor’s Office, International Relations and Extraditions Unit
I spent the summer in Santiago, Chile, working with the International Relations and Extraditions Unit in the National Prosecutor’s office. The majority of my time was spent working on a project that condensed and summarized the immigration and deportation laws of 10 European countries. I also visited various institutions involved in the judicial process, such as the national police academy and the national prison academy. I heard an oral argument for a sexual abuse case, as well as a series of parole hearings. I also sat in on an extradition hearing’s oral argument at the Supreme Court. The experiences and conversations I had throughout the summer were incredibly beneficial to me. Before leaving the U.S. in May, I had no idea that there were so many different judicial systems in the world. I am incredibly grateful that my co-workers took the time to instruct me on the many ways that Chile’s judicial system varies from that of the U.S. Additionally, the opportunity to research so many different approaches to immigration broadened my perspective and highlighted that there is not necessarily one right way to handle immigration. I think the most beneficial aspect of the entire experience was the reminder of how challenging living in a new country can be, especially when trying to understand the basics of a foreign language. The Chilean accent is definitely one that takes time to get used to and to understand. When I left (after seven weeks), I was just getting to the point where I somewhat understood the language. I think it is incredibly important to have these reminders of what some of our future clients may be experiencing. I know that I will likely end up working with immigrants so this perspective will continue to benefit me as I move forward.

–Sarah Flinn, 2L

The Wilderness Society
This past summer I was awarded a 2015 PILG Clerkship that enabled me to volunteer at The Wilderness Society as a law clerk. Founded by environmental greats like Aldo Leopold and Benton Mackaye, The Wilderness Society has helped protect wild places since 1935. With this notable history as the backdrop to my placement, I was particularly excited to clerk for a group about which I felt passionate. Without the PILG Clerkship I may not have been able to pursue this position because like all law school students, I barely make ends meet. Looking forward, I hope to combine my forestry education, previous work experience and legal education to pursue public interest employment. The Wilderness Society was a great opportunity to participate in public interest lawyering and to network with potential future employers. This stipend helped me further establish myself as a public-minded, environmentally-focused lawyer.

–Joseph Small, 3L
Boulder Public Defender’s Office, Juvenile Specialist
I worked as a Juvenile Specialist Intern, at the Boulder Public Defender’s Office, during my PILG clerkship. This opportunity was a great learning experience and a wonderful chance to reconnect with the passion that initially brought me to law school. In my internship, I had the opportunity to observe many aspects of juvenile delinquency defense, such as observing client meetings, observing docket and observing trials. I also was able to participate in various aspects of the juveniles’ defense strategy: conducting detention interviews, attending Community Review Team meetings, researching and writing post-conviction motions, helping with discovery review, and helping with preparation for trial. Working with the juveniles, thinking about complex legal issues, and being surrounded by professionals who really care about the young people they work with both inspired and rejuvenated me. I came to law school simply because I want to help young people. I was able to do that through this opportunity. Going forward I am interested in juvenile justice, and helping delinquents and defendants who suffer from mental health issues.

–Mia Kontnik, 2L

Colorado Public Defender’s Office
This past summer I interned at the Colorado Public Defender’s Office. It was the best work experience that I have ever had and it helped solidify my interest in being a public defender. I learned first-hand what inspiring and tremendous work that our Public Defender’s Office in Colorado does on a daily basis. With the support of my PILG clerkship, I was able to devote all my time and energy to this externship, as opposed to working a part-time job in order to survive. This extra time and energy allowed me to fully experience the life of a public defender. I represented a litany of clients in court. Without the assistance of a public defender, or any attorney, I witnessed how quickly and easily the court and prosecutors process people from marginalized and indigent communities. It was already an uphill battle for the people that we were able to help, but at least they had someone in their corner—someone that wouldn’t allow them to be processed through the criminal justice system as easily as the judges and prosecutors would like them to be. And, fortunately, I was able to be there to help jam up that system. I was also able to litigate in motions hearings and jury trials! Most of my work was on the losing end of things, but I learned to define wins differently. For instance, we forced a prosecutor to take a .32 DUI to trial because he was unwilling to make a reasonable plea offer. What should have been a “slam dunk” for the prosecution in trial ended up as a hard-fought battle that culminated in an hour and a half deliberation from the jury. Even though we ultimately got a guilty verdict, I was able to give my client a voice in a courtroom that was never meant to hear what he had to say. And, hopefully, we helped change the way that prosecutor handles similar cases in the future.

–Nick Rogers, 3L
Social Sustainability at DU and in Denver

How can we define the tenets of sustainability? Though some claim that the word’s ubiquity renders it dead, perhaps it is time for educators to restore its effectiveness through action. In these times of social unrest, our duty in academia should be to address real questions of inequity. At DU’s Farmer’s Market, students, staff, and faculty were asked the question “What does social sustainability mean to you?” A broad range of responses emerged. As DU attempts to become more sustainable, it is imperative that we be able to define social sustainability.

Put simply, social sustainability promotes well-being and quality of life within communities. At DU, it is the responsibility of students, faculty, and staff to ensure that the basic needs of all members of the campus community are met. Moreover, the campus community must be made aware of DU’s role in the broader Denver metro community. These endeavors must be accomplished by working with each other to create socially just and inclusive communities.

Organizations like the University of Denver’s Center for Community Engagement & Service Learning and the Center for Sustainability increase our community presence, as do Denver Law programs like our clinics and public interest externships. Efforts like these foster positive interactions between DU and Denver. Re:Vision (a social justice organization based in Westwood), for example, was created by two DU alumni and currently has six interns from the ranks of DU undergraduates and recent graduates. These interns gain life experience, refine vital employment skills and contribute to empowering communities in Denver through food justice. The benefits to DU, to Denver and to the individuals involved are immeasurable. Let’s make sure that we keep sustainability alive.

–IRISE Post-doctoral Fellow Jennifer Grace Ewa

The Denver Urban Debate League @ Denver Law

Denver Law’s official partnership with the Denver Urban Debate League (DUDL) brings that organization under our roof and gives our law school a stake in the academic futures of local high school students. DUDL is comprised of 150 students, all of whom join teams representing fifteen high schools from Denver Public Schools and Aurora Public Schools—districts that boast high percentages of diverse students. Students participate in debate competitions and develop skills which often translate to academic success and access. DUDL students express great interest in attaining a college education and in past years have been accepted to DU and many other institutions, including Yale, MIT, Colorado State University, Metro State University, Regis University and the Universities of Wyoming and Wisconsin.

Denver Law students are invited to become part of DUDL, a main component of Denver Law’s Pipeline Program, by volunteering as a judge for one or more DUDL competitions throughout the year. No experience in debate is necessary. New judges receive a 30-minute orientation, after which students are ready to help high school debaters develop their analytic and presentation skills as they spar with their peers over issues and questions that profoundly affect our world. This is an excellent opportunity for students to use their burgeoning legal skills to help grow the next generation of college students and potentially future lawyers. And law students can have some fun while doing it! See DUDL’s 2015-16 schedule online. Please contact Randy Wagner for more information about volunteering at rwagner@law.du.edu. Please visit us online to read more about Pipeline Programs at Denver Law.

–Administrative Director for Strategic Initiatives Randy Wagner
Partnersing with Professors on Public Interest Projects

Recently, Denver Law has begun offering even more classes in which students can gain practical experience by working on pro bono projects and/or other legal work with faculty members. This is a great way to not only enhance your legal skills, but also form meaningful relationships with professors. Some of these experiences are highlighted here.

Homeless Advocacy Policy Seminar

This semester, in partnership with the Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP) and Denver Homeless Out Loud (DHOL), Hartje & Reese LP Chair and Professor of the Practice of Law Nantiya Ruan is leading a seminar on homeless advocacy for eleven Denver Law students. Over the course of the semester, the students will collect data and author an original policy report on local laws that negatively affect homeless citizens in Colorado. The report will be the first statewide analysis of its kind, and will reflect similar reports completed by students in Seattle, Washington and Berkeley, California.

Homelessness in America continues to be a national crisis, and Colorado is no exception. Policymakers have resolved to deal with the problem of “visible poverty” by enacting laws that increase the prevalence of “quality of life” ordinances. These ordinances prohibit essential life activities, such as sitting, sleeping, camping and panhandling in public places. With a lack of shelter beds and nowhere else to go, homeless citizens are often cited, harassed and told to “move on.”

Focusing on this move towards criminalization, Ruan’s students will survey municipal codes across the state, submit public records requests, and analyze the data for enforcement trends and cost of incarceration. For a qualitative perspective, the class will also interview members of the community, including police officers and current or former homeless citizens. By the end of the semester, the students will have produced a comprehensive policy report that will be distributed widely in support of Colorado legislation and a Homeless Bill of Rights.

By examining the prevalence, enforcement, and cost of these laws, we can begin to understand the harmful impact they have on state resources and on society’s most vulnerable citizens. Inspired to help, Ruan’s students are eager to contribute to the national discourse and to provide reasonable alternatives for what they believe are ineffective and discriminatory laws.

—Kobi Webb, 3L

The Public Interest Lawyering Lab Spotlight

I have had the pleasure of working with Professor Justin Marceau for almost a year, including working in the Public Interest Lawyering Lab during the Fall 2015 semester. I say “working with” rather than “working for” because Professor Marceau makes all of the students in the lab feel like partners working with him on cases. We aren’t just doing busy work; we’re actually having a real impact on real cases. We get hands-on experience writing complaints, motions, research memos and other legal materials. Additionally, we get involved in litigation strategy.

For example, a few other students and I gave a presentation on a variety of state statutes that could potentially be challenged as unconstitutional. We examined the pros and cons of suing in each state, not only based on the strength of the claim we could bring, but also based on the logistics of suing in each state. We looked into things like what type of legislative history was available and how long the statutes had been in place, along with other factors. Then at the end of our presentation we got to decide the state in which we should file a complaint.

Getting this type of experience while being a law student is invaluable because I am already learning how experienced attorneys think about strategy before bringing a case. We also get the opportunity to talk to potential clients and to work with other attorneys on cases. Overall, working in the Public Interest Lawyering Lab is an amazing experience because we get to make a substantial impact on real cases while we are still in law school.

—Michael Wilmore, 2L
Workplace Rights Project

The Workplace Rights Project is a six credit (three in-class, three out-of-class) live-client clinic that is exclusively employment focused, representing low-wage workers in wage claims in state and federal court, federal employees with whistleblower claims, and victims of discrimination in state, federal and administrative proceedings. The seminar meets once a week in the late afternoon and the course fulfills the capstone requirement for the Workplace Law certificate.

–Assistant Professor Raja Raghunath

“Last spring, as a student attorney in the Workplace Rights Project, I was able to take a case to trial in front of the Merit System Protection Board. The experience not only changed my outlook on the work that lawyers really do, but it also changed my chosen career path. The trial, and the clinic as a whole, opened my eyes to the struggles workers face on a daily basis. The MSPB trial was the perfect introduction into this field of work. I was relieved to have a small bench trial be my first. However, by the end of the trial I was ready for something bigger. Working in the clinic and preparing for trial was a lot of hard work and some very long days, but it was also incredibly fun. I had a great experience communicating with opposing counsel, conducting depositions and examining witnesses at trial. These skills simply cannot be taught in a classroom. I believe that I learned more during one semester working in the clinic than I had in my previous three semesters of law school.”

–Alex Pass, 3L

“I enrolled in the Workplace Rights Project in the spring semester of my second year of law school. It is difficult to overstate how much this experience allowed me to learn about civil litigation, and how valuable the exposure was when it came to the reality of what it means to be a lawyer. I participated in client intakes, pre-trial conferences and a MSPB hearing. I also participated in the writing of motions, demand letters and a post-trial brief. Though we had sage guidance from our supervising professor, my lab partner and I were responsible for the cases assigned to us. While at the hearing, my partner and I were responsible for making the opening statement, direct and cross examinations, objections and the closing argument. While finishing the semester off with a trial was far more work than any final exam, I have felt extremely prepared for the externship and clerkship that I have done since that time. Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of the lab was the gratitude expressed by some our clients, who informed us that they had waited a long time to get their day in court, and how they were grateful for our preparation and our willingness to go to bat for them when so few had in the past. These experiences reaffirmed my desire to practice law, and gave me a glimpse into the real ‘why’ of lawyering. I highly recommend such an experience to any law student seeking an understanding of the law that goes beyond the theoretical.”

–Cameron Hunter, 3L

Students interested in enrolling in the Workplace Rights Project may join the waitlist during registration, and they will be contacted for an interview before being enrolled in the class. For further information, please contact Assistant Professor Raghunath at rraghunath@law.du.edu, or stop by room 390H.
Part-time/Evening Students: Fulfill your Public Service Requirement from your i-Phone!

If you are looking for a convenient way to either fulfill your 50 hour Public Service Requirement and/or gain practical experience, consider participating in Virtual Pro Se Clinics (VPC), which are free monthly legal clinics at public libraries for parties who need legal assistance but don’t have or cannot afford to hire an attorney. These free clinics aim to provide one-on-one interaction with knowledgeable volunteer attorneys to help people understand the legal processes and procedures in a wide variety of civil legal actions. This is not pro bono representation, and the volunteer attorney’s discussion with VPC patrons about process and procedure does not constitute legal representation or legal advice.

All clinics are done online; students and lawyers can participate anywhere they have internet access and a webcam-equipped device (smartphone, laptop, tablet, etc.). Issues encountered will include civil issues, such as landlord tenant law, probate law, family law, veterans’ benefits, protection orders and more.

Student participation will be in three phases:
1) Watch at least one clinic and get familiar with the procedures, processes, etc. in Colorado civil legal cases;
2) Second chair (at discretion of supervisor attorney) a clinic to assist participants; and
3) First chair (at discretion of supervisor attorney) a clinic to assist participants.

Clinics run on different dates/times throughout the year and many are held in late afternoon and early evening. While this may not be a perfect timeframe for those of you who work during the day, there may be options to piecemeal together a few different clinics that could work for your schedule.

Email afreeman@law.du.edu with any questions. Or, to apply directly, email your resume to Ric Morgan, at morgan@hayday.org. Please note: You will have to complete all required paperwork for a public interest practicum in order for your work on this project to count towards your Public Service Requirement.

For more information on the VPC, please visit www.cobar.org/tcl/tcl_articles.cfm?articleid=8527.

If this opportunity is not a good fit for you, contact afreeman@law.du.edu to discuss other ways to satisfy your requirement, as there is a list of placements that may be more suitable for evening students.