Public Service at Denver Law

News and Updates

SPRING 2017

Highlighting events, people and issues related to public service and the law at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law.
The Denver Law Review Takes on Justice Reinvestment
Katie Steefel, 3L

The Denver Law Review hosted its annual symposium on February 2 and February 3, 2017. This year’s topic was “Justice Reinvestment: The Solution to Mass Incarceration?” The conference brought together national and local scholars, attorneys, community organizers, and activists to discuss justice reinvestment approaches. The conference focused on whether efforts to divest from prisons and reinvest in community needs, like education, healthcare, and mental health treatment—known as justice reinvestment—could be effective measures to end mass incarceration.

Thirty-five local and national experts, including Dean Bruce Smith and other Denver Law faculty members, served as speakers, panelists, and moderators during the two day conference. The over 180 registrants represented a broad cross-section of Colorado’s community such as students, professionals and educators, as well as persons who were formerly incarcerated. Panelists discussed the racial impact of the current criminal justice system, the areas in need of investment, how to implement justice reinvestment in the current judicial system, and how to make justice reinvestment community centered.

The final segment of the symposium focused on the future of justice reinvestment in Colorado. This section called for action in Colorado by people working in seemingly different fields, but all of which relate to mass incarceration. Hopefully, the Denver Law Review’s 2017 Symposium will prompt more conversations and actions related to justice reinvestment.
Students Spend Spring Break Contributing to the Public Good

More than 25 Denver Law students chose to spend their spring break supporting clients and communities in need of legal assistance. Here we highlight three of the most popular service activities.

Alternative Spring Break Trip in Texas
Julia Davis, 2L

Over spring break, eight Denver Law students traveled to El Paso, Texas, to volunteer with organizations serving the legal needs of low-income immigrants, including asylum-seekers, victims of crime, and families seeking reunification. The trip was funded in part by DU’s Chancellor’s Scholars Fund and the Dean’s Fund.

The students learned about the criminal repercussions of entering the United States unlawfully, researched immigration issues, put together asylum requests and parole letters, spoke with attorneys in the field, and observed immigration court proceedings at a detention center. On their last day in El Paso, the students also went on a United States Border Patrol tour to learn more about the department and its responsibilities. Several students also crossed the U.S.-Mexico border to spend the afternoon in Juárez, Mexico.

Visiting the southwest border of the United States was particularly informative. By interacting with local residents and observing the landscape, students learned what it is like to live in an area where immigration issues permeate every facet of life. While the weeklong experience was engaging and meaningful, the big takeaways were the stories heard and the impressions formed, which the students hope to spread in their own communities.
Tribal Wills Project
Associate Professor of the Practice Alexi Freeman
Professor Lucy Marsh

Eighteen Denver Law students traveled to two different Navajo Chapter Houses, Nenahnezad and Upper Fruitland, outside of Farmington, New Mexico, as part of the Tribal Wills Project. Supported by Professor Lucy Marsh and fourteen supervising volunteer attorneys, the students created wills and related documents for 75 clients. Nearly all of the clients at these sites were Navajo. This trip builds on the January Tribal Wills visit to Arizona, where clients from eleven different tribes received support.

The necessity of wills for tribal members became apparent after the American Indian Probate Reform Act of 2004 and subsequent amendments changed the way some pieces of land are distributed to heirs. Under the act, if a tribal member were to die without a will, most of the member’s trust lands would pass to the oldest child, the oldest grandchild or the oldest great-grandchild. If none of these specific descendants exist or are able to receive the property, the trust lands will pass to the tribe. This means that regardless of the tribal member’s desires, no other family member will have any claim to the lands. However, the Act allows for tribal members to have wills, which can determine the way that owned trust lands would pass. This has created a need for wills so tribal members can determine to whom their land shall pass.

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In 2013, the Office of the Special Trustee in the U.S. Department of the Interior reached out to law schools around the country in an effort to develop a program that would help tribal members draft wills. Denver Law was the only law school to respond. Thus far, the Tribal Wills Project has provided wills and power of attorney documents to individuals in Arizona, Colorado, Montana and Utah.

Next up: a trip to Montana in May 2017 to support tribal members from the Crow Nation. Please contact Professor Lucy Marsh at lmarsh@law.du.edu for more information.

*Please note: part of this brief is modified from an article that appeared on NPR on March 25, 2017.

Asylum Law Course
Professor of the Practice Scott Johns

During this year’s spring break, two teams of students taking asylum law served as volunteer researchers assisting with ongoing litigation in the European Union (EU) on behalf of two asylum seekers currently living in Greek refugee camps. Supporting of field attorneys in the refugee camps, the students drafted country reports detailing human rights violations. The first case involved a Syrian refugee seeking asylum because of forced conscription by the Syrian Army, which has perpetrated numerous human rights violations. The second case involved a student activist from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) seeking asylum due to persecution by the DRC government directly targeting opposition student protesters. Denver Law students produced two research reports, each of which was tailored specifically to these cases for use by field attorneys representing both refugees in their clients’ upcoming EU asylum interviews. The Syrian research group was tasked by law students Jennifer Guzman, Sarah Flinn, Ema Medic, Tahli Salem, Ryan Butler, Allison Dunlap, Sean Golden and Justin Walker. The DRC Research Group was composed of Keah Beeftu, Ema Medic, Sarah Flinn, Tahli Salem, Jeffrey Allen and Heather Campbell. The students’ work, simply put, was outstanding.
21st Annual PILG Auction
Ashley Smith-Roberts, 2L

The 21st Annual Public Interest Law Group (PILG) auction was held during the week of March 27, 2017. Law students bid on auction items and professor experiences, with the ultimate goal of raising money for PILG Summer Clerkships. Clerkships are competitive and are awarded to students who do unpaid public interest work during the summer. Denver businesses donated over 50 items, including spa packages, gift cards, massages, wine club memberships and more. Over 30 professors and staff members donated “experiences,” which ranged from activities such as bike rides, bowling and golf, to dim sum and gourmet dinners. Every year, the “professor/staff experiences” are some of the most highly sought-after items, as students get the chance to gather friends together and spend time with their favorite faculty or staff members outside of the law school doing fun, non-academic activities. This year was no different, with students racing to outbid one another and vying for the chance to win!

The most exciting part of the PILG auction is the sense of community that is created around public interest law. Auction Week is an opportunity for students, faculty and staff, and the wider Denver community to rally together and show their support for students who choose to pursue work that benefits the public good. In the past, students who have received the PILG Summer Clerkships have worked in areas such as environmental law, legal aid, mental health services, and at district attorney and public defender offices.

Denver Law students, faculty, and staff all bid to win items at the annual PILG auction.
Civil Litigation Clinic Broadens Its Scope  
Jennifer Wadhwa, Clinical Fellow, Civil Litigation Clinic

This semester, the Civil Litigation Clinic (CLC) embarked on a new community lawyering project: a collaborative relationship with Our Home, Our Right (Nuestro Hogar, Nuestro Derecho), which is a resident-led housing campaign addressing displacement, discrimination, unfair evictions, and lack of affordable, safe places to live in southwest Denver. Under Clinical Fellow Jennifer Wadhwa’s guidance, CLC students support Our Home, Our Right’s efforts to bring about lasting change within their community.

This semester, the organizers sought the CLC’s assistance with hosting a community legal night designed to increase awareness around their campaign and provide the community with helpful legal information tailored for the specific issues experienced by Westwood-neighborhood families. CLC students and faculty members collaborated with the Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network, the Colorado Poverty Law Project, and student attorneys from the law school’s Workplace Rights Project to provide Westwood residents legal information on immigration, housing, wage theft and domestic violence law. Nine student attorneys from the CLC and the Workplace Rights Project attended the event and answered residents’ questions about housing issues, workplace disputes and domestic violence law.

The community lawyering project will continue next fall. The CLC also will be adding immigration cases to its docket in addition to its work in family, housing and wage theft law.

Public Interest Law Week Informs and Celebrates Serving Others  
Associate Professor of the Practice Alexi Freeman  
Megan McCulloch, 1L

The Public Interest Law Group (PILG) teamed up with the law school’s Office of Career Development & Opportunities, Legal Externship Program, and the Clinical Programs to host Public Interest Law Week in early March. Students were able to attend information sessions on clinics, externships, and financial management within the public sector. Three sessions initiated by PILG, however, anchored the week.

Overcoming Barriers to Practicing Civil Rights featured lawyers from Rathod Mohamedbhai, the ACLU of Colorado, and Holland Holland Edwards and Grossman, among others. The attorneys discussed having your own civil rights practice, the need for more civil rights practitioners in our region, and the importance of getting to know the small but mighty local civil rights legal community.

Public Interest Career Paths featured recent Denver Law alumni, including lawyers from the Humane Society, Colorado Legal Services, the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, and the Hans Meyer Law Office. The lawyers discussed challenges like managing student loans, as well as the importance of remaining true to your principles throughout your legal career. While finding public
interest legal work is far from easy, the attorneys showed us the real range of jobs within the public interest legal field and helped us expand our definition of public interest law. Each practice setting comes with its own set of benefits and challenges, including but not limited to the flexibility and stress of running a mission-motivated private public interest firm, the stability of JD advantage jobs in the government sector, and the mayhem of public policy work during the legislative session. Nevertheless, the passion driving each attorney to contribute to the public good inspired us to continue fighting the good fight and exploring new ways to impact the people and issues we care about most.

**Change the Neighborhood, Change the World**, brought local community members from different social movement and outreach organizations to discuss opportunities for students to start getting involved in public interest efforts about which they feel most passionate. The speakers included the general counsel for the Colorado Muslim Society, a representative from the outreach group Mi Familia Vota (which assists immigrants with citizenship and enfranchisement), a student representative from the University’s movement Divest DU (whose goals are to combat climate change by urging DU to divest its endowment from holdings in fossil fuels), and a representative from another main campus group advocating to make DU a sanctuary campus. The speakers shared general information about their organizations, then delved more specifically into different volunteer opportunities that are available. Many of the opportunities presented were specific to law students, including ideas about how to continue contributing throughout one’s legal career—even if that career is not specifically focused in public interest. Others were available to anyone, such as sit-ins and demonstrations, where a mere show of support in numbers is what may be needed to make a difference. There was a brief but captivating discussion about how organizational missions and objectives have evolved since the changeover in the federal administration. Associate Professor Margaret Kwoka outlined a number of causes being taken on by various professors within the law school, suggesting students to reach out to professors to get involved. Overall, the speakers were uplifting and motivating—a great end to a week abounding in public interest spirit!
Denver Law Awards 13 Graduates Loan Repayment Assistance Grants
Associate Professor of the Practice Alexi Freeman

For the fourteenth year in a row, Denver Law provided forgivable loans to repay students’ law school related debt through the Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) which provides financial support to alumni pursuing public interest careers within the nonprofit or government sector. For many graduates, debt loads constrain public interest career choices. LRAP was created to provide graduates with the financial support necessary to accept lower-paying public interest employment.

This year, thirteen alumni received LRAP awards. Their work spans a wide gamut: from legal services for Native Americans and running a nonprofit dedicated to reproductive justice, to creating policy for the mayor, investigating civil rights complaints and advocating for the protection of the environment (among other causes), the 2017 recipients’ work has taken them all across the state of Colorado and throughout the United States.

Each year, an average of 35% of graduates are eligible for LRAP awards and recipients can receive funding for up to five years without reapplying. LRAP awards vary in amount but are closely aligned with existing federal loan support programs. Denver Law is proud of the service provided by our 2017 award recipients, and we look forward to continuing our support of graduates who contribute to the public good.

So You Want to Be a… Advising Series
Associate Professor of the Practice Alexi Freeman

Under the leadership of Administrative Director Randy Wagner and in collaboration with many faculty and staff, Denver Law hosted an advising series this past March. Aimed at providing insight on specialized paths with the law, sessions covered a range of practice areas, including criminal defense, criminal prosecution, family law, civil rights, immigration law and more. The sessions provided helpful advice on specific courses to take and the people and places to research within specific practice areas.

If you are interested in public interest law or contributing in some way to the public good, your path may not be “traditional” and that’s ok! Consider what excites you and what issues you are most passionate about. Have your values be a driving force in course selection, experiential opportunities and more. Denver Law is excited to work with you to make your vision for the world a reality.
STAY CONNECTED!

Want to keep in touch with the public service community at Denver Law? Visit the Public Service Portal for news and upcoming events.

Would you like to contribute to this newsletter, or do you have concerns, questions or suggestions about public service at Denver Law? Contact Alexi Freeman at afreeman@law.du.edu.