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CAROLINA LAW

Reaching Out to Eastern Carolina

Students Gain Practical Skills while Delivering Legal Services



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Reaching Out to Eastern Carolina

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PHOTOS BY DONN YOUNG

When alumni Greg Boyd '04 and his wife Laura Boyd '02 were planning their annual gift to UNC School of Law, they came across a small project in need of funding: a group of law students who were planning to spend Spring Break 2009 working with Legal Aid of North Carolina to draft wills and advance directives for low-income individuals in eastern North Carolina. But the students were short on funds for gas, food and shelter – all necessary for them to conduct the pro bono service project.

The project struck a personal chord for Greg, a native of Chocowinity in eastern North Carolina.

“It’s literally one of those places with one stop light and a dirt road,” says Greg, who left his hometown after high school to attend East Carolina University in nearby Pitt County. He later earned his medical degree at the UNC School of Medicine, followed by his J.D. at the School of Law. “All my family on both sides still lives there, and I spent the first 17 or 18 years of my life there. Some of my family are the kind of people who would benefit from this project, and I had the impression that the project needed funding to happen.”

The Boyds were two of about 30 alumni and friends of Carolina Law who supported a group of 20 students and their three advisors in their collaboration with Legal Aid of North Carolina. “We found that people really wanted to support this project,” says Paul Gardner, associate dean for advancement at UNC School of Law. “And the students who participated were excellent fundraisers in their own right.”

Among those alumni and friends who gave to the project were families of the participating students and law school staff as well. Carolyn Brafford, an administrative office coordinator in the office of

advancement for the law school, directed her monthly contribution to help send the students on their way. Brafford, a 22-year employee of UNC, had previously supported the renovation of Memorial Hall, but when that commitment ended she said she wanted to support a project that would provide immediate aid to someone in need.

“When I looked through everything, I just wanted to give to something that I knew would help others,” says Brafford. She knew that the students were doing a lot of work to raise funds themselves, and she wanted to help – knowing that donations large and small would help the students’ effort to get the project off the ground.

“You can donate money to scholarships and professorships, and that’s a good thing, but I enjoy immediate outcomes – and that’s what I was able to see with this gift,” says Brafford, who reports being impressed and pleased with the outcome of the trip.

“I think this project is a good example of the way alumni and friends can help the school in a variety of ways,” says Gardner, whose staff helped the students obtain the funds that helped make the project possible. Gardner notes that in addition to providing financial support, alumni in eastern North Carolina met with the students, helped them find housing, gave them an introduction to private rural legal practices and hosted breakfast with a federal judge and dinner in New Bern. “They were also giving in ways outside of monetary contributions – giving their time and advice in ways that were fruitful to the students in terms of practical experience,” says Gardner.

“We had the opportunity to work directly with those in need,” says third-year student Seema Kakad, who notes that the experience tested the students’ legal skills. “It also gave us a chance

“I just wanted to give to something that I knew would help others.” —CAROLYN BRAFFORD



to help people who really needed us, and there's an honor in being able to serve the public that way. Then we had the opportunity to engage with lawyers and community advocates who work full-time in underserved areas. The whole experience gave us a better understanding of the role that law and policy – and state and national decisions – have at the community level.”

The project was developed from collaborative discussions among Legal Aid, the UNC Pro Bono Program and the UNC Center for Civil Rights. Each of the groups had the same goal to help the people of North Carolina, and the law school's groups had additional goals.

The Pro Bono Program develops projects that help instill public service values and provide students with practical skills training. Sylvia Novinsky, assistant dean for public service programs, notes that she also wanted to encourage students to explore professional opportunities in eastern North Carolina. “I started my own legal career with Legal Aid in a rural area on the eastern shore of Virginia, and I wanted to introduce our students to the challenges and rewards of working in underserved areas.”

Among the Center for Civil Rights' goals is the commitment to helping minority landowners preserve, protect and maximize the value of their assets. Mark Dorosin, senior attorney for the UNC Center for Civil Rights, found that the project was in line with the center's goals, and offered the center an additional way to work directly with students.

Dorosin and Novinsky knew they could develop a program that would meet the goals of each partner and that they would need to identify the appropriate community needs and find funding.

Gardner was among the first people Novinsky asked to help. He notes that within a few months of hearing about the project,




Top: Ms. Viola, a frequent visitor at the senior center in Greenville, N.C., sought assistance from pro-bono students on completing her will. Above: UNC School of Law's Sylvia Novinsky (left), assistant dean for public service programs; Katie Bowler, assistant dean for communications; and Mark Dorosin (right), senior attorney for the UNC Center for Civil Rights, meet with Legal Aid's Evan Lewis, senior managing attorney in the Greenville/New Bern offices; and David Caddigan, managing attorney for the New Bern office, in New Bern, N.C. to coordinate the Spring Break project.

he and his colleagues were able to draw upon their knowledge of alumni and friends in the area who could provide students with additional opportunities while working on the project.

The students were invited to Sumrell, Sugg, Carmichael, Hicks & Hart, P.A., for lunch and a discussion about practicing law in a small town firm. They also spent a day with the Hon. Louise Flanagan, chief judge for the U.S. District Court – Eastern District of N.C. Flanagan invited them into her courtroom to hear a case about a Mocksville, N.C., town official who was prosecuted for violating the Clean Water Act.

While at the court building, the students had the opportunity to talk with two attorneys appearing in Flanagan's courtroom that day – assistant U.S. attorney J. Gaston B. Williams, who prosecuted the Clean Water Act violator, and defense attorney James “Jimbo” Perry '80, who was in court to handle a felony sentence hearing

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in a drug case. Perry's son Madison was also there as a student participating in the project.

"These students learned a lot through their work with Legal Aid," says Novinsky. "And the opportunities they had at the law firm and the courtroom helped provide a very well-rounded experience."

"We love that our students are helping people in North Carolina and learning practical skills at the same time," says Gardner. "And it's wonderful to get our alumni involved this way."

The enthusiasm of the students and the coordinating faculty and staff created a momentum for the development team. "There's a story behind each donor's interest," says Gardner. "And when we understood the scope of the project, it became easier to identify alumni and friends who could help this project succeed."

Gardner notes that one of the largest donations came from Baker Hostetler in honor of a partner's 65th birthday.

"Baker Hostetler honors partners by making a contribution in the partner's name at his or her alma mater, and they made a gift in honor of Dan Gunsett, a 1974 graduate of our school," says Gardner. "We called Dan to ask how he wanted the funds used, and he liked the idea of targeting it toward a project that would provide a valuable service for eastern North Carolinians and, at the same time, give our students a chance to do some practical legal work."

Other donors and supporters include Kristopher Barrios, Clint and Shawna Bolick, James and June Downs, Margaret Emerson, Mike Flanagan '66, Gray and Rebecca Faulkner, Janith Gebhard, Paul Glover, Ed Holub, Don and Marjorie Hopkins, Bob '59 and Ann King, Theo and Pamela Lovell, Mark Michaud, Mary Michaud, Barbara Perry '50, John and Claire Pickett, Frank Sheffield Jr., Matthew and Victoria Thompson, Ann Wall, David Ward, Gwen Whiteman, Mary Ann Williams, and the law firm of Glenn, Mills, Fisher and Mahoney. Gardner notes that individuals who helped the project in other ways include Arey Grady '98, Scott Hart '92 and Jimmie Hicks '91 at Sumrell, Sugg, Carmichael & Hicks; the Hon. Louise Flanagan; James "Jimbo" Perry '80 of Kinston; and the Hon. Ken McCotter '71.

One of Gardner's long-term goals is to keep building relationships with alumni that will facilitate these kinds of projects in the future.

"I'm hoping that the more we get out and see people, the more contacts we'll have to help our staff and students coordinate these kinds of projects," he says. "A lot of it comes out of conversations



Pro bono students in New Bern, N.C., hosted by the Willis family.

you have with people – they let us know what they're interested in supporting, and we can often link them to projects that our students and faculty are already doing or considering."

"The donors were an important part of making this happen," says Gardner, "but the students, faculty and staff were the ones who had the energy and plans that made this successful."

On the Ground

Ultimately, 20 legal students spent four days of their spring break donating their time and skills to draft more than 30 documents for low-income residents in a rural part of the state. They also assisted with tax and housing cases already in progress.

"The students engaged in direct client representation under the supervision of attorneys from the law school and Legal Aid," says Dorosin, of the UNC Center for Civil Rights. "The clients were given access to critical legal resources, health care powers of attorney and vital documents that will help them meet their goals related to their end of life issues. From the center's standpoint, we hope to help these families preserve their land, which for many has been in their families for generations and is often their most valuable asset."

"We couldn't have accomplished this project without the direction of and partnership with Legal Aid," says Novinsky, who noted that **Celia Pistolis '82, assistant director of advocacy and compliance for Legal Aid of N.C., was instrumental in developing the project.**

"Celia recognized what an opportunity this was for our students, and she and her team were diligent in finding locations and clients for us to work with," says Novinsky.

Dorosin notes that the cost of legal services, as well as alienation from the legal system, often prevent many people of low wealth from being able to adequately protect their assets. "Furthermore, providing these types of voluntary pro bono services is part of the school's commitment to give back to the people of North Carolina," he says.

"We knew we needed community organizations that could help us reach out to let people know these services would be available," says Dorosin, who notes that the project required advance in-the-field coordination and promotion before the trip began.

Legal Aid has a strong network throughout North Carolina, with offices in every county in the state, and their staff often facilitates services in rural senior centers or other facilities, such as the offices of a local health department or community development corporations. Dorosin and Novinsky made multiple trips to eastern North Carolina to meet with a group of attorneys and managers at the Legal Aid office in Greenville, including **Pistolis; Evan Lewis,** senior managing attorney in the Greenville/New Bern offices; **David Caddigan,** managing attorney for the New Bern office; **Leslie Albritton,** staff attorney for the Greenville office; and **Stephanie Allen,** paralegal and elder law coordinator in the New Bern office. They had frequent conference calls to find housing and coordinate on other logistical plans.

After Legal Aid and UNC laid the groundwork for success, the students, the Center for Civil Rights and the offices of communications at Legal Aid and the school helped with outreach: students and center staff developed flyers that were posted at the community centers, communications specialists contacted radio stations and newspapers, and phone calls were made to pastors, volunteers and anyone else who could help spread the word in these rural communities.

Conducting the Work

For four days over spring break, the students separated into two groups working in a number of locations in eastern North Carolina.

“For all of them, it was a real eye-opening experience to get a sense of the socioeconomic range that exists in North Carolina and to see an area just a few hours away that is a low-density, rural community where people have to drive a long way for many services. Some clients drove an hour or two to participate in the program,” says Dorosin. “The students discussed the challenges of providing legal services in rural communities and how difficult it can be for a low-income family to travel, even to access free legal assistance.”

Boyd acknowledges that distance is often a barrier in the communities where he grew up.

“You have communities of about 100 people separated by 30 minutes of driving,” he says, noting that his earlier training as a doctor opened his eyes to access issues in the area. Doctors, dentists and lawyers are all few and far between, he says.

A few clients had to cancel their appointments because they could not get transportation to the meeting places, even with advance notice, but others were determined to make the meetings. One such client was a woman known to the students as Ms. Viola.

“She often came to the senior center in Greenville for dance classes, and she heard that Legal Aid was going to be there. She had a specific legal question that she wanted to speak to somebody about,” says Emily Wallwork, who was then in her first year of law school. “When she learned that we were also there, she was game for getting all of her advance directives ready. The cost of a will is about \$1800, and that kind of cost is prohibitive to a lot of people.”

Wallwork says the chance to make a personal connection with a client gave her a taste of how her legal training will help people.

“Even though all we knew about Ms. Viola were the specifics of what she wanted in her document, I feel that we formed a bond because we helped her in a way that was important to her and her family,” says Wallwork, who was able to visit with Ms. Viola in her home. “The reason we went on this trip was to help mitigate the effects of land loss caused by not having a will. Just seeing her house and the land, and knowing once the document was notarized, that land is protected in her family – that was very moving.”

Once the documents were completed to the clients’ satisfaction, they were reviewed and notarized by one of the Legal Aid attorneys. Legal Aid also keeps copies of all the paperwork, says Wallwork.

“It was my first real taste of pro bono work. It changed my perspective and made me realize why I’m in law school,” says Wallwork. “It was easy for me to forget, when I had my nose in a book, what I came here to do. I can see myself going into public interest, but I also know that if I choose not to, pro bono work will still be an important part of my professional life.”

Sustaining the Work

This four-day trip to eastern North Carolina was a first for students in the Pro Bono Program. In the past, students have organized a team to go to New Orleans to assist with disaster-



U.S. attorney J. Gaston B. Williams and defense attorney James “Jimbo” Perry ’80 talk with students in the courtroom of the Hon. Louise Flanagan, chief judge for the U.S. District Court – Eastern District of N.C.

related legal issues, or they’ve found individual pro bono opportunities throughout North Carolina. Student organizers say they plan to repeat the collaborative work with the Center for Civil Rights and Legal Aid this fall in Moore County, where the center has been working with low-wealth communities for more than five years, and again in the spring in eastern North Carolina. The Pro Bono Program students expect to recruit other students from outside the program as well, tapping the skills of those interested in estate and tax law.

“This is the type of project that appeals to a lot of different students,” says Novinsky. “Whether they end up in a large firm or in public interest, the students have skills that can be helpful in the community. That’s true of all types of work, even outside of law, and what we hope to do is help foster a sense of community responsibility.”

Novinsky and Dorosin note that the spring break trip enabled them to develop a model that can be implemented in other communities, and that they hope future trips help residents of the state.

“We had clients thank us and say that they were going to sleep a little better knowing what would happen to their property after they passed,” says Kakad. She plans to include pro bono work as part of her career. “We underestimate sometimes the difficult situations that people are in.”

Getting outside of the academic environment to see law in action appeals not just to the students, but to those who supported the trip.

“It mattered to me that they were providing a service there in eastern North Carolina,” says Greg Boyd, who now practices gaming law at Davis & Gilbert LLP in New York. Boyd recalls that he and Laura decided to support the project because they knew they’d be helping his childhood home. “It mattered to me that they were sending a lot of folks out there, some of whom might like it, think it’s beautiful, and decide to come back and stay – and that’s good for the communities as well.”