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Balanced scales: Green lawyers learn as they aid indigent

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Article Text:

In his position as executive director of Southwest Pennsylvania Legal Services, Robert Brenner said he used to spend weeks training newly graduated lawyers how to be lawyers. He decided to do something, rather than just complain.

Brenner, who is also an adjunct professor of law at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, began a clinical studies program in 1987 that's benefited not only Pitt law school students, but also Legal Services and thousands of indigent clients in Washington County. On Wednesday, Brenner, Legal Services board members and some of the students who benefited from the clinical program gathered to celebrate the anniversary of its founding. Students who have completed at least three semesters of law school are eligible to register for the clinic, which entails spending one day a week in the Legal Services office on Cherry Avenue near Washington County Courthouse. Each student handles about 10 clients each semester.

David Herring, dean, professor of law and director of clinical studies at Pitt, is one of the clinic's biggest supporters.

"I owe my job to Rob Brenner," Herring said of his clinical position at the university's law school. "Number one, ! he's training students to be lawyers where they interact with real clients, and not just studies. And, number two, it's a service to a client who otherwise wouldn't have representation with client services."

Eighty percent of the Legal Services clients are low-income wage earners who find hiring a private attorney to be too expensive, Brenner said. Only 20 percent are unemployed or are on disability.

About 120 law students, mainly third-year students, are involved in the externship program.

Since its inception, Brenner estimates students have provided, free of charge, about \$700,000 in client services. Even though Brenner oversees Legal Services in Fayette, Somerset, Greene and Washington counties, the program is only operational in Washington County. Eventually, he hopes to expand service to clients in the other counties.

Most of the services provided by the students, all of whom are closely supervised by Legal Services lawyers, involve family issues, such as divorce, custody and protection-from-abuse orders.

"It gives them skills, ethics and exposure in court, and it's relatively risk-free," Brenner said. Students cannot be "fired" or feel pressure for billable hours.

"The clients are happy as the students are genuinely interested," Brenner said. "We always

get good feedback."

As of 2002, students provided assistance on 5,000 cases.

Angela Kusturiss of Kusturiss and Associates in Canonsburg is a 2000 graduate of the Pitt law school and was a clinic participant.

"It was my most valuable experience in law school," Kusturiss said. "I expected (law school) to prepare me better for the practice of law, but without this program, I would have felt less prepared. It opened my eyes on how to help people."

Lane Turturice of Bassi, McCune and Vreeland of Washington and Charleroi also was a participant before graduating in 1999.

"Lawyers go into court the first time and they look like a deer in the headlights," Turturice said. "After I passed the bar and went into court, I may have been nervous, but not unfamiliar."

Dan Pietragallo is a third-year student from Pittsburgh who participated in the program for two semesters.

"It's very much a hands-on clinic. In law school, you're mainly working out of books," Pietragallo said, adding it's the best of both worlds.

"Students get practical experience and Legal Aid gets help with its workload," he added.

Ismael Jadur is a practicing attorney in Argentina, but completed the master's program at Pitt and is working with the law firm of Eckert Seamans for a year. He spent one semester with Legal Services in Washington. Jadur was impressed with the clinic and hopes, one day, to convince his colleagues in Argentina to implement a similar program.

Despite what the lawyers say, the clients are the biggest benefactors.

"The greatest thing I can say about the program is that in my firm, I don't have the opportunity to see that many indigent clients, but when I do, I always think back to those people I helped in law school," Turturice said.

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