

Fellowship Helps Graduates Take Learning Into the Field

> In mid-August of 2009 Nick Manthey ('09) left for Quito, Ecuador, to conduct research and assist five attorneys who had formed a nonprofit organization to develop a curriculum for teaching mediation and arbitration. The opportunity was part of the Law School Robina Post-Graduate Fellowship program, which offers graduates an opportunity to do public policy research for nonprofit organizations, assist public defender offices, or assist judges while adding real-life experience to their resumes.

Manthey speaks fondly of his time in Ecuador. "One thing I would say is the most meaningful work involves "opportunities where you are able to help others," he says. "I found this was true of my work in Ecuador. The people I worked with were both warm and kind, and it was a great experience trying to help a small, dedicated group of lawyers change the legal system in a country of 13 million people."



Nick Manthey ('09)

The fellowship's first year

The Law School's new Program on Law, Public Policy, and Society, which is backed by a grant from the Robina Foundation, funded a majority of the 37 fellowships awarded to graduates in the program's first year, says Alan Haynes, director of the Career and Professional Development Center (CPDC). In return for a \$5,000 stipend, fellows provide 400 hours of service to the partner organization.

The fellows chosen exhibited a desire to "make a difference on a larger scale" with organizations and "would

be good representatives of the Law School," says Dana Bartocci, CPDC employer relations coordinator. Fellows either found an organization to work with or selected one from a list the Law School had established, Bartocci explains.

Many of the partnering groups have limited funding and staff available for public policy research. The fellows are able to gain experience and references while helping an organization, Bartocci says. Fellows "have a chance to reach out and help a community while improving their credentials," Haynes adds.

The Post-Graduate program follows in the footsteps of the Robina summer fellowship program, begun last year, which offers Law School students internships in the community while still attending school, Bartocci says. The Law School hopes to continue a similar program this summer, she says. The Minneapolis-based Robina Foundation funded most of the Post-Graduate fellowships. The foundation, the brainchild of well-known philanthropist and alum James H. Binger ('41), is a contributor to other Law School programs.

Filling important needs

By all accounts, Post-Graduate fellows were treated as attorneys and did not spend their time copying documents, fetching coffee, or answering phones. They got started nearly the moment they arrived making serious contributions to their organizations.

Consider Mark Torma ('09) and Josh Feneis ('09), who used their fellowships to contribute to the Volunteer Lawyers Network (VLN), a nonprofit organization offering legal services to people in poverty who face civil issues, such as housing, bankruptcy, debt collection, and family problems. Torma provided policy advice on several issues,

while Feneis offered hands-on legal advice at a VLN clinic inside the Hennepin County Government Center.

Torma did a great deal of research on organizations similar to VLN in an effort to formulate a more efficient process for providing legal services to people facing bankruptcy. VLN needed a "new model" for working with those clients, he says.

His proposal for changing the VLN process, which has been adopted, included having nonlawyer volunteers help clients collect the necessary documentation before their court date. The new process has cut the time required to manage a bankruptcy case by as much as 50% and reduced "the time and stress" of getting "mundane paperwork" in order before hearings and trials, he says.

Torma also suggested allowing VLN to serve clients with slightly higher incomes—up to 200% of the poverty level. To meet the increased workflow, VLN would have to stanch the flow of clients returning again and again as their "judgment-proof" status changed, he explains.

Clients without jobs are judgment-proof and not liable for their debts. But when they get jobs, their creditors have a right to ask for payment, Torma explains. Such clients revisit VLN repeatedly as they lose and get jobs. The solution Torma arrived at was for VLN to have judgment-proof clients go through the bankruptcy procedure so they would not cycle through VLN's system time and again. Making that change means those clients "would not be back for years rather than months," says Torma.



Mark Torma ('09)

“It was a really great experience to be out in the community connecting with people. It was a lot more beneficial than a job search done from my laptop, and it opened up a new career possibility in public policy work.”—Ellen Maxfield ('09)

Feneis arrived at VLN after Torma, starting in January of this year. He spent much of his time at the Government Center clinic, offering



Josh Feneis ('09)

legal advice in 15- to 20-minute increments to help clients understand, for example, the impact of a default judgment or how to fight for the return of a security deposit. He used his remaining fellowship time at VLN to develop volunteer attorney clinics. “I spent a lot of time learning about the process and procedure of the system and how the law really affects people,” he says.



Ellen Maxfield ('09)

Ellen Maxfield ('09) used her Post-Graduate Fellowship to work at the United Way of

Central Ohio in Columbus, her hometown. In 2010 she researched pending Ohio legislation that would have an impact on United Way, drafted legislative testimony for board members and volunteers in an effort to support a school wellness bill, and reignited the agency's dormant public policy newsletter.

Maxfield has been astonished by how quickly the United Way put her talents to work on top-line issues and in representing it at meetings. Within a month of joining the agency, she made a presentation before nearly 80 people involved with the Ohio Workforce Coalition. “I've been incredibly impressed by the work and the autonomy and the possibilities the United Way of Central Ohio gave

me,” she says.

Manthey taught English at a local Quito school in 2004 and traveled widely in Central and South America. When he returned to Quito last summer to work at the human rights organization DECIDE Corporación de Estudios, he lived with a group of young people from around the world who worked in various agencies.

Ecuador's new constitution, adopted in 2008, had an overarching goal of reforming and modernizing the nation's legal system, and one objective was creation of an alternative dispute process. Manthey helped build a framework for a program to teach professors at Ecuador's 18 law schools how to integrate mediation and arbitration classes into the curriculum. In addition, he created a structure that will allow law schools to provide low-cost legal services based on models found in the Law School and at the Minnesota Justice Foundation (MJF).

Moreover, he created a Web site for the organization featuring its publications and then put to use his grant-writing skills in two ways. He translated several lengthy grants applications and identified potential financial donors to DECIDE.

Having conducted grant research for a Hennepin County judge who created a special co-parenting court for divorcing couples, Manthey had a good idea of how to find foundations willing to fund new legal projects. “I ended up using Google to find quite a few potential donors” for the nonprofit, he says. Some money DECIDE hopes to raise would be dedicated to establishing a partnership with the MJF, he points out.

The value of the experience

Torma, who found a position at the Autism Advocacy and Law Center in

Edina, Minn., during his fellowship, says the VLN project “gave me a chance to research in a field I'm deeply interested in, and it gave me a chance to meet the local bench and bar. I had a chance to meet with a lot of different people, and the work, to my mind, was very meaningful.”

For at least one recipient, the fellowship turned out to be a conversation starter. During an interview with a judge for a clerkship in Todd County, Feneis pointed out that he had worked with VLN on a Robina Post-Graduate Fellowship. The judge, Jay D. Carlson, wound up hiring him. “I brought up what I had been doing the last couple of months and he was suddenly interested,” says Feneis. “I believe it helped me get the job.”

Maxfield's experience may have changed her outlook on nonprofit organizations. At one time, she aspired to a position with a large law firm, but now she has broadened her search to include nonprofits. “It was a really great experience to be out in the community connecting with people,” she says. “It was a lot more beneficial than a job search done from my laptop, and it opened up a new career possibility in public policy work.”

After his time in Ecuador, Manthey toured Columbia with a friend before returning to Minnesota to clerk for Hennepin County Judge Bruce Peterson. Manthey stays in touch with the attorneys he assisted in Quito and hopes to establish a connection between them and the MJF.

“I really love Quito,” he says. “It's a center of business, nonprofit, and legal activity in South America and I knew it would be a great place to work to make a difference during my fellowship.”

By Frank Jossi, a freelance writer based in St. Paul, Minn.