A fellowship legacy

HPRP program with public policy focus honors late staffer

BY LAUREN KIRKWOOD

While zealous advocacy is what attorneys aim for every day, becoming an advocate for systemic change in the way society handles issues such as homelessness and poverty might seem out of reach.

But a fellowship at the Homeless Persons Representation Project launched six years ago to honor the legacy of HPRP staff attorney Linda Kennedy aims to give one law student each year the opportunity to look at legal issues from a policy perspective and help bring about change at the legislative level.

“We didn’t think there were a large number of opportunities for law students to immerse themselves in the policy making process at either the state or city council level,” said Antonia Fasanelli, HPRP’s executive director. “Linda Kennedy was devoted to policy work on behalf of vulnerable populations. We wanted to honor the tremendous accomplishments she achieved by creating the next generation of policy leaders in the advocacy community in Maryland.”

Melissa View, a third-year student at the University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law, began her tenure as this year’s Linda Kennedy Fellow several weeks ago. The first fellow chosen to honor Kennedy, who died of breast cancer in 2007 at age 43, now serves as the director of HPRP’s Homeless Youth Initiative.

“It was an opportunity that seemed so rare and really exciting,” said Ingrid Lofgren, who became the inaugural fellow in 2009. “It’s also not an experience that you can pick up by reading stories or reading a casebook. As a law student, you are stalking the halls of Annapolis trying to find people to support a bill and explaining it to them; you are organizing … to get written testimony and to get people in the room.”

“The biggest thing the fellowship underscores for me was the importance of, if you’re in public-interest law for underrepresented people, you can’t just focus on your clients because the law is already against them,” said Aaron DeGraffenreidt, a 2011-2012 Linda Kennedy Fellow who now works at Maryland Legal Aid. “If there’s bad law out there, you’re going to fight losing battles all the time.”

Sometimes, the fellows said, those losing battles include the ones fought for new legislation: both Lofgren and DeGraffenreidt worked for the passage of the Maryland HOME Act (Housing Opportunities Made Equal) during their fellowships but have not yet seen it pass.

Losing battles

The concept of making an impact not only by representing individuals but also by advocating for policies that treat poor or homeless individuals fairly is central to the fellowship, Fasanelli said.

“It’s about systemic change,” she said, the program is also a launching pad for the next generation of policy leaders. “You have to really bring it and be confident and problem solve and think on your feet,” Lofgren said.

The bill would prohibit landlords from discriminating against potential tenants based on their source of income, such as federally funded housing choice vouchers.

“Seeing how that advocacy is done was nothing short of amazing,” DeGraffenreidt said. “It’s not things you can pick up by reading stories or reading a casebook. As a law student, you are stalking the halls of Annapolis trying to find people to support a bill and explaining it to them; you are organizing … to get written testimony and to get people in the room.”

In addition to giving HPRP another voice in Annapolis, Fasanelli said, the program is also a launching point for the fledgling careers of the fellows, who have hailed from both UM Carey Law and the University of Baltimore School of Law.

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