



## Betsy Prendergast: Tennessee Bar Association's 2005 Law Student Volunteer of the Year

[By Kenneth Davis]

Recent law school graduate Betsy Prendergast didn't just study legal terms and attend lectures while a student at the University of Memphis School of Law. She got in the trenches and gained hands-on experience as a volunteer for the Community Legal Center in Memphis, which provides pro bono services to people who can't afford legal counsel, but earn too much to qualify for legal aid elsewhere. Prendergast volunteered for the center the entire time she was a law student; and in January of this year, the Tennessee Bar Association honored her for her efforts with its 2005 Law Student Volunteer of the Year Award. The award is given annually to a Tennessee law student who has performed outstanding volunteer service by working with an organization that provides legal representation to the poor.

Prendergast, who graduated in May, said the example set by attorneys dedicated to pro bono work inspired her to start volunteering.

"There are many successful attorneys here in Memphis who are quietly devoting much of their spare time to help assure equal access to the legal system by taking on pro bono cases from organizations like the Community Legal Center," she said. "Before I even decided to go to law school, I saw firsthand the difference these pro bono attorneys could make in a client's life with only a few hours of their time. I wanted to do the same."

While a volunteer with the Community Legal Center, Prendergast said she did everything from answering the phones and other clerical tasks to meeting with clients at the legal clinics and recruiting and coordinating other law student volunteers. Prendergast also belonged to her school's Public Action Law Society, where for two years she organized the annual spring volunteer fair—a key event for connecting law students with pro bono agencies. In addition, she worked for the Memphis Area Legal Services while in law school, but she did it for school credit and not as a volunteer.

In addition to her volunteer work, Prendergast interned as a law clerk with the Office of General Counsel for the University of Tennessee Health Science Center. She said the internship exposed her to a wide array of

health law issues and taught her things that she couldn't have learned inside a classroom.

"Without a doubt, my internship gave me very practical experience in the day-to-day practice of law that traditional law school classes don't begin to expose you to," she said. "For instance, I became very humbly aware of the vital role support staff plays in the smooth functioning of a law office. I may have learned more from the paralegals and secretaries than from the attorneys."

She said it was a great feeling to volunteer for an organization like the Community Legal Center.

"An amazing amount of human dignity is preserved when our clients are given the same access to the legal system that everyone else has," she said. "It is satisfying to feel like you have played a part in that. I also enjoy the opportunity that volunteering affords me to work with like-minded attorneys."

Prendergast said that she considered a career in law when she was very young, but got sidetracked after she graduated from high school in 1995.

"As early as seventh grade, I had considered going to law school," she said. "But for a time after high school and before I went back to college in earnest, I started down a myriad of other career paths—everything from retail management to professional photography."

She said after a long period of indecision about her career, she earned a degree in political science from the University of Memphis in 2003 and then went on to receive her law degree from the University of Memphis School of Law this year. Prendergast said that the main reason she decided to go into law is that she wanted to get involved in health policy reform and felt that she needed to gain a greater knowledge of the law in order to do that.

She said that what she enjoys most about the study of law is the possibilities it opens up for people.

"As Charles Houston once said, 'A lawyer's either a social engineer or he's a parasite on society,'" she said. "Law, like few professions, really allows us to effect social change, even if only one step at a time."

Prendergast said that her biggest influence during law school was the late Elmore Holmes III, one of the founders of the Community Legal Center.

"[He was] a pillar of the Memphis legal community," she said. "It was an honor to serve on the board of the Community Legal Center with him."

She said her favorite law school memories were during law professor Ralph Brashier's classes.



"It didn't matter what dense material we were covering in property, decedents' estates, or elder law; Professor Brashier could keep us all laughing as we learned," she said. "The man uses his brilliant wit to teach—and does so very well."

She said her favorite courses in law school were the Elder Law Clinic and Trial Advocacy, even though she doesn't plan to be an elder law attorney or a criminal litigator.

"I really am a hands-on kind of learner," she said. "And I think I walked away from both of those classes feeling like I had learned something that I could put to real and practical use. After three years of studying law in the abstract, this was very reassuring."

Prendergast said that she definitely plans to continue doing volunteer work once she becomes an attorney.

"I hope that becoming a licensed attorney will enable me to volunteer in more meaningful ways," she said.

Prendergast, who took the bar late last month and will get the results in mid-October, said that she would like to work in the public interest sector "tackling access-to-healthcare issues."

She is currently on the job hunt and has been sending out resumes to legal aid organizations, public interest law firms, and a few government agencies. She said she hasn't used a recruiter in her job search thus far.

"Most of these resume submissions were of the cold-call variety," she said. "But I have also relied extensively on word of mouth, the school's website, and, of course, sites such as LawCrossing."

Prendergast said that she feels nervous about making the transition from law student to lawyer.

"I know there is a lot yet to be learned," she said.

When she's not focusing on her legal career, Prendergast said she likes spending time with her husband, Rick, who is an IT analyst with FedEx.

"My husband is a wonderful guy who has supported me throughout law school," she said. "Now that we once again have a modicum of free time, we hope to spend every minute that we can camping and traveling."

#### ON THE NET

University of Memphis School of Law  
[www.law.memphis.edu](http://www.law.memphis.edu)

Community Legal Center  
[www.clcmemphis.org](http://www.clcmemphis.org)

University of Tennessee Health Science Center  
[www.utmem.edu](http://www.utmem.edu)