



## Jill Meinhardt: Executive Director of the Pro Bono Research Group and President of Advocates for Children at Moritz College of Law, Columbus, OH

[By Heather Jung]

When she graduates this year, Jill Meinhardt, a 3L at Moritz College of Law in Ohio, will be armed with a J.D. and an M.A. in educational policy and leadership. She has accepted a position at the Cleveland law firm Britton, Smith, Peters & Kalail, a boutique law firm which specializes in school law.

"I will be working part-time on exclusively special education matters while balancing the rest of my time with other school law topics," Meinhardt said. "The position and the firm seemed like a perfect fit as soon as I learned about the position."

Meinhardt was recently recognized for her commitment to public service. She was awarded first runner-up for the NALP/PSLawNet Pro Bono Publico Award. According to the Moritz alumni newsletter, the award is "given by the National Association of Law Placement (NALP) and the Public Service Law Network Worldwide (PSLawNet) to students in recognition of the extracurricular commitment they have made to law-related public service projects or organizations and the impact they have had on their fellow students, the school, and the community." The newsletter also says that when she graduates in May, Meinhardt will be given one of the College of Law's most esteemed public service awards: "designation as a Public Service Fellow with the Dean's Highest Honors. This award is given to students who accumulate 450 or more hours of volunteer legal service."

"Jill has boundless energy," Ruth Colker, one of Meinhardt's professors, said. "She always has a big smile on her face, is the first to laugh with pleasure, and seeks others counsel with admiration and respect. It's wonderful that she is being recognized for her volunteer work because she is the first to praise others."

**Q. What do you do for fun?**

A. I think it's so important to have things that are fun and important to you outside of law school. Since beginning law school, I have gotten my scuba diving certification and like to dive. I also like to travel as much as possible. I make a point at least one or twice a week to hang out with friends without talking about law school.

**Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?**

A. Jimmy Buffet

**Q. What is the last magazine you read?**

A. *In Style*

**Q. What is your favorite TV show?**

A. *The Cosby Show*

**Q. Who is your role model?**

A. There are a lot of influential people, particularly in the civil rights movements, that inspire me. Marian Wright Edelman comes to mind. But honestly, the four children that I served as a GAL for through law school are my role models. They are children with unimaginable disabilities who were in the middle of a contentious termination of parental rights hearing. These children face more challenges than most of us can ever comprehend. Yet, each time I see them, they are happy, up-beat, and learning to conquer new things. Maybe it's their resilience or just childhood innocence, but they inspire me more than anything or anyone I have ever experienced.

As an undergraduate, Meinhardt was a child psychology/criminology major with a minor in special education. For her student teaching, she taught at an urban school for children with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

"The injustices I saw in the school and in the children's lives were unimaginable, and the experience inspired me to go to law school to try to change things in public education," Meinhardt said.

It is her desire to fuel change that has led Meinhardt to her involvement in two Moritz organizations: the Pro Bono Research Group and Advocates for Children.

According to the Pro Bono Research Group's website, the purpose of the program is: "To provide legal research assistance to Ohio's legal services programs. To offer students a unique opportunity to develop legal skills and experiences in a nontraditional educational setting with a positive impact on the lives of real people. To raise awareness in and to nurture a commitment to meeting the legal needs of low-income families and individuals. To continue to break new ground in the legal community."

As the group's Executive Director, Meinhardt oversees the members of the group, which include nine members of the executive board, 12 managing editors, and 25 research fellows. According to Meinhardt, "the research fellows take requests from legal



aid attorneys and, with the help of their managing editor, write research memos for attorneys” all over Ohio. The executive board not only runs and edits the research process; they also host a law symposium each spring and manage a grant that allows the organization to train attorneys to represent children as guardian ad litem.

Meinhardt is also involved in Advocates for Children, a group which strives to promote and support child advocacy. It also endeavors to raise awareness of the legal issues children face today, as well as serve as a way for law students to network with law professionals who advocate for children’s rights.

As president of the organization, Meinhardt oversees the various activities of the organization. She is in charge of an event that raises funds for a stipend that is given to a student who works in an unpaid position in children’s law during the summer. She also helps coordinate special events and volunteer opportunities. Every year, the organization sponsors a family at Christmas, and Meinhardt coordinates that sponsorship. She also helps with various career development activities such as finding internships for students in the organization.

“I think that most student organizations offer you an enjoyable and rewarding way to make a difference for either your law school, your surrounding community, or to something that you feel is important,” Meinhardt said. “Even more so, however, my involvement in student organizations has allowed me to meet law students with similar interests who, not surprisingly, have become some of my best friends.”

In addition to her work with the two on-campus organizations, Meinhardt also works with the Court Appointed Special Advocates of Columbus (CASA) as a guardian ad litem (GAL) for four children (aged eight, six, three, and two) with developmental disabilities. According to the newsletter, the children are in foster care due to neglect by their parents, and Meinhardt has devoted countless hours

to them, visiting them at their foster homes, attending case hearings, arranging for all of their basic needs to be met and exceeded, and she was even cross-examined at a trial about her role in the children’s lives.

“I know that Jill made an impact on the lives of many children by helping them when the others around them had let them down,” Colker said. “Jill was their ‘safety net’ when society’s safety net was not working.”

She has also worked as a “surrogate parent” for two children. According to Meinhardt, a surrogate “is a person who is trained and appointed to provide educational consent for children in special education who are wards of the state or whose parents have lost their educational decision-making rights and another individual who meets the definition of a parent is not available and/or willing to provide educational consent for the child.”



The first child she served as a surrogate for was a high school student who was living in residential placement (due to the fact that a foster home could not be found) and was enrolled in a public high school. Meinhardt was the boy’s surrogate until he graduated from high school. She was also a surrogate for a first-grader whose parents no longer had parental rights due to a neglect/abuse case. Since he had some emotional and behavioral problems, he could not find a long-term foster home. She was his surrogate until Children’s Services found him a foster home, and he was eventually adopted.

“There is no doubt in my mind that Jill is dedicated to pursuing a career in public interest law, serving children,” Kate Federle, a professor at the College of Law, said. “I

have worked closely with her as the faculty advisor to Advocates for Children and am looking forward to seeing what she will be able to accomplish on behalf of children in the years to come.”

Meinhardt says that she has always wanted to work with children, particularly those with special needs. That desire was further confirmed her senior year of high school when she worked at a preschool for children with disabilities, a very rewarding job.

“When a child who has no language says his or her first word at age seven or when a child with severe emotional problems makes a good decision after you’ve been working with them for months is one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had! By being a lawyer, I hope to help ensure that every child enjoys the right to have access to services that allow them to achieve in these ways,” she said.

Her professors feel that Meinhardt will go far in her chosen field.

“Jill is amazing,” Colker said. “She clearly has a passion for public service and engages in that activity because of the enjoyment she gets from helping others. Although we offer a ‘pro bono’ certificate to students who do volunteer work, Jill volunteered on a weekly basis as much we expect during three years of law school to get that certificate. And her passion is contagious. She helped excited others into doing more public interest work.”

**ON THE NET**

Advocates for Children  
[moritzlaw.osu.edu/students/orgs/index.php?ID=1](http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/students/orgs/index.php?ID=1)

Pro Bono Research Group  
[moritzlaw.osu.edu/pbrg/](http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/pbrg/)

Britton, Smith, Peters and Kalail  
[www.ohioedlaw.com/](http://www.ohioedlaw.com/)