

Kelli Dunn Howard On Landing a Public Interest Job

[by Teresa Talerico]

As a Legal Aid attorney in Austin, TX, Kelli Dunn Howard spends her days championing the rights of low-income tenants and the disabled. She can't imagine doing anything else.

"I went to law school solely for the purpose of going into civil rights law, public interest law, whatever you want to call it," Ms. Howard said. "I always wanted to have a career that somehow involved social services, fighting for people's rights."

Public interest law can be a deeply rewarding opportunity to make a difference, whether it's working for the American Civil Liberties Union or a local environmental group. Nevertheless, it's a competitive field that is not as financially lucrative as others. Breaking into public interest law can require doing volunteer work in law school, tracking down grant money, and recognizing that it's not about slaying giant dragons of injustice every single day.

Ms. Howard, a staff attorney for Texas RioGrande Legal Aid and a graduate of the University of Texas School of Law, offered some advice for those interested in public interest careers.

Start early. If your law school has a public interest association, join it. Visit your school's public interest career center if there is one. Make contacts in the community where you want to work. Connect with other students who share your interests.

"That can be very important at a school like UT, where I'd say fewer students are interested in public interest than, say, at a school like Berkeley," Ms. Howard said. "You really want to have that group of people that are like minded."

Apply for post-graduate public interest grants and fellowship programs. Equal Justice Works, formerly the National Association for Public Interest Law (www.equaljustice-works.org), is an excellent resource for these, many of which require that you develop and head your own project. Ms. Howard recommends researching fellowships in the second year of law school and applying for them in the third year.

"Because the funding is so difficult to come by, it's worth your time to go through the fellowship process," she said. "It looks very good on your resume. You can show you've been in charge of something at the age of 25, right when you graduate from law school, which is not something a lot of people can say."

EJW also has a career fair every year in Washington, DC.

Demonstrate your dedication to public interest work. That could mean anything from volunteering at a domestic violence center, clerking for Legal Aid or taking relevant classes.

"Now that I'm on the hiring side, I know what we look for is people who've got a resume that shows they've already been working in public interest," Ms. Howard said. "We want to know they're committed to doing this because we're not doing it for the money. We want you to be here because you really want to help the clients and you're really passionate about it. I can say that's true for a lot of public interest employers."

Remember: you're not in it for the big bucks.

"The lack of money is always going to be there," Ms. Howard said. "You have to accept that as a reality. You may not have a secretary, and your friends have their own secretary. You may have a computer from 1984. Those are things that could happen to you, and you've just got to work with it. There are very few material perks."

Ms. Howard noted that there are loan-forgiveness programs available to help public interest attorneys with student loan debt.

"The non-monetary reward is that you love your job," she said. "I don't do this for the money; I do this because I love it. My mentor throughout undergrad and law school likes to quote Fredrick Douglass, who said that 'in the struggle for justice, the only reward is the opportunity to be in the struggle.' If you have that in mind, you'll go far."

Don't underestimate the work you're doing.

"When you start out, you might have a more lofty view of what civil rights work is," Ms. Howard said. "You don't realize that a lot of things that might seem a bit mundane are actually about civil rights. Like consumer law. You might help someone who's been given a bad loan on their mobile home: the interest rate is out of control; they can't make the payments. Maybe this person has been taken advantage of because the person only speaks Spanish. That's a good example of a civil rights case. It's not happening at the Hague War Crimes Tribunal. It's happening



to thousands of people all across the country all the time. It's all about people's rights and protecting them, even if you're wrestling questions of civil procedure rather than sovereign immunity or the constitution or something more exciting."