



Santa Clara Law Students Work and Innovate at Law Center

[by Erica Winter]

The Katharine & George Alexander Community Law Center at the Santa Clara University School of Law in Santa Clara, CA, is a vibrant mix of legal services for local people and educational programs for law students.

The law center was started by members of La Raza Law Students Association in 1993, who volunteered to provide legal services for low-income workers in the community. Originally called the East San Jose Community Law Center, the center added services in immigration and employment law in 1994 and now offers consumer law services as well.

That first group of law students more than 10 years ago “set up a desk in a bakery” in East San Jose, says Professor Lynette Parker, the center’s Supervising Attorney for immigration matters. Now, the center is between San Jose and Santa Clara, making it more accessible to law students, but also on a bus line so clients have access.

The law center is “very much a student-driven place,” says the current executive director, Professor Cynthia Mertens. Many of the center’s services are provided on an academic credit/clinical model. There are some volunteer opportunities at the center, however. A volunteer workshop-teaching program for first-years was begun at the student level like the center itself.

When Mertens took over as head of the center in 2001, there had been a few workshops led by law students for members of the community on auto fraud, a large issue in the area. A student came to Mertens and suggested a workshop on tenants’ rights, and a new program was born.

The program, which was kicked off as a full program in 2004, requires the group of first-year law students to attend a daylong

training session with a supervising attorney in October. The first-years learn about issues in workers’ rights, consumers’ rights, and tenants’ rights. Then, two students and one professor go out into the community and speak on these legal issues.

Mertens and two law students recently went to a homeless shelter, spoke to 40 men on tenants’ rights, and provided “very valuable advice” on what to look for when going out and looking for housing, says Mertens. Law students and professors also go to speak to local English classes, as well as other community groups.

Last year, law students and professors in the program gave 61 workshops for 1,536 local people, says Mertens. Now, “1Ls have a wonderful opportunity to give back to the community,” she says.

Academic clinical programs at the Santa Clara Law Center allow law students to participate on three levels: in a legal advice clinic, providing legal services to center clients under attorney supervision through a Skills I course, and then continuing that work in a more advanced Skills II course.

The Advice Clinic is usually the first stop for community members, says Mertens, although some are referred directly to the law center’s legal services. Participating law students take the Advice Clinic course, which includes an all-day training session at the start of the semester on ethics, interview skills, cross-cultural communication, and working with interpreters, says Parker.

There are four to ten law students who work in the advice clinic. The student conducts the initial interview and then provides the information to a supervising attorney for review, says Parker. Then, the law student passes on the attorney’s advice to the client, which can include referrals to other local organizations, as well as referrals to the law center’s case services.

Dividing the students and services into those provided by “case-handling students” and “advice clinic students” “works really well,” says Parker, with many students participating on both levels.

In the Skills I course, students meet once a week to discuss cases and clients’ needs and to learn more about how to serve them. The students work in the law center’s clinical programs as they take the course handling all aspects of the center clients’ cases, from doing intake interviews to drafting documents to representing clients at hearings while “practicing under close supervision” of attorneys, says Mertens.

Students receive “hands-on training in the work they are going to do as lawyers,” says Mertens. The clinical experience provides law students with a “good educational grounding in providing legal services,” says Parker.

After graduation, law students who worked at the legal center go on to become consumer advocacy lawyers, immigration attorneys, or workers’ rights advocates, says Mertens. Others who were looking for the practical training to go on to large law firms also par-



ticipate. Serving clients who “wouldn’t have help otherwise...makes you feel good about what you’re doing,” says Mertens.

The center, as it welcomes a new director when Mertens goes back to teaching full time, will not expand its services again soon. Although there are still hopes to add legal services in disability rights for children and expand landlord-tenant services, budget cuts have put those plans on hold, says Mertens. Santa Clara County has given the center \$100,000 in funding, but Mertens has just been notified that all civil legal services funding in the county will be cut for next year.

The current programs will continue, however, as Angelo Ancheta, currently director of legal and advocacy programs with Harvard Law’s Civil Rights Project and a legal lecturer, joins the Santa Clara University School of Law and the law center in May.