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Parisa Fatehi, from left, Frances Valdez and Matthew Pizzo discuss files of immigrants being served by the UT law school clinic this month in a Houston bar.
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UT law students' assignment a crucial one

Those working in immigration clinic often defend desperate clients

By **JAMES PINKERTON**

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There aren't many college students whose grasp of their classwork can make an immediate and profound difference in someone's life.

But at the University of Texas law school, students selected to work in an immigration clinic often defend clients who can't afford to lose their case.

"It was hands-down the most rewarding experience of my life — I felt like I had someone's life in my hands," recalls Kate Lincoln-Goldfinch, a 27-year-old Austin native and UT law school senior. "There are asylum seekers who are fleeing real danger in their countries, and if they were returned, I didn't have any doubt they would be hurt or killed."

Lincoln-Goldfinch and her classmates secured the release of a pregnant Nicaraguan woman from an immigration jail so her child wouldn't be born inside. They persuaded immigration judges to grant asylum to an African schoolteacher and a half-dozen Christian families who had fled Iraq because of religious persecution.

And they took part in a lawsuit that resulted in a settlement to improve conditions for immigrant children jailed with their parents in an Austin-area detention center.

The students are part of a free immigration law clinic opened in 1999 on the oak tree-lined campus of the Austin law school. Each semester, a group of 10 to 15 promising law students are selected to work in the clinic and are soon tackling the often complex legal problems encountered by immigrants.

The UT clinic's phone number is posted on the walls of a number of immigration detention centers in Texas, and students say they get frequent calls.

"Unfortunately, resources at the immigration clinic are severely limited. We can only help a very small percentage of those who call," said Matthew Pizzo, a 24-year-old law student from Pasadena who plans to graduate from UT in May.

The clinic is directed by law professor Barbara C. Hines, a two-time Fulbright scholar and immigration attorney with more than 30 years of experience. Hines said the clinic was established because of concerns expressed by Latino law students about the scarcity of free legal services for immigrants.

"Clinics are very important, because they give students an opportunity to apply what they learn in academic classes in real work settings," Hines said. "It is a wonderful experience for students, because they actually represent clients while they're in law school."

Hines said the students do most of the hard work needed to represent clients.

"They go to court under our supervision. They present the cases. They write the legal briefs. They present the testimony in court," she said.

Among Pizzo's first clients were Chaldean Christian families who had fled Iraq, where members of the small sect are a minority. The families had surrendered to U.S. immigration authorities in Southern California, he said, and were placed in detention in Texas.

"They did not swim the river. They didn't use false documents. They went to the international crossing and said, 'Please help me, I'm seeking liberty,'" Pizzo said. "These are Iraqis who were severely persecuted — they're considered infidels, traitors and crusaders."

Many of the UT law students involved in the clinic, including Pizzo, plan a career in immigration law once they become licensed attorneys.

Parisa Fatehi, an Iranian native who graduated from UT in May, said the experience was "absolutely critical to my legal education."

"Law school equips you with some powerful tools, and being part of the clinic lets you put some of those tools to use right away," said Fatehi, 29, who works as a law clerk for U.S. District Judge Vanessa Gilmore in Houston.

Fatehi and other students took on the defense of a young woman from Nicaragua who had come to the United States seeking asylum after she was forced into prostitution in her home country.

The woman, who had an infant and was expecting another, was detained in the T. Don Hutto detention center in Taylor near Austin. During her stay at Hutto, the infant lost a disturbing amount of weight, Fatehi said.

"It exposed us to why help was needed on multiple fronts," she said.

The students persuaded a judge to release the woman, who is now awaiting trial on her asylum claim.

"It was consuming," Fatehi said of her clinic duties. "It was hard to compare my commitment to something I was learning in a textbook, to a woman who needed our help."

Earlier this year, students from the UT immigration clinic joined the American Civil Liberties Union in a suit against the government on behalf of 26 children detained in Hutto. They alleged the prisonlike conditions violated existing court rulings that require the least restrictive detention facilities for minors.

The case was settled in August, when U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials agreed to make improvements at Hutto, including the expansion of education and medical services.

Lincoln-Goldfinch, who will graduate from UT law school in May, has been awarded a two-year fellowship financed by the Dallas-based law firm Akin Gump to provide legal services to detainees in Hutto.

"I wouldn't have pursued it, I wouldn't have known about it. None of it would have happened if I hadn't done the immigration clinic," Lincoln-Goldfinch said.

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