

PUBLIC INTEREST LAW SCHOLARSHIPS Will BENEFIT LEGAL AID FOR POOR

by MARY ALICE ROBBINS

When Jackie Pontello entered law school in August 2001 at the age of 39, her goal was to become a public interest lawyer. Pontello says she had to put that goal on hold after graduating from the University of Houston Law Center in May because she has to pay off \$68,000 in student loan debts.

Pontello says her loan repayment plan requires her to pay more than \$7,000 annually — an amount that she says would eat up about a third of her take-home pay if she took a job as a legal-aid lawyer earning from \$35,000 to \$43,000 a year. Instead of becoming a public interest lawyer, Pontello took a job as executive director of Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse in Houston — a job similar to what she was doing as director of the End Hunger Network before she went to law school.

“I went back to law school precisely to do public interest law,” Pontello says. “I’m back to doing exactly the work I was doing before.”

Pontello says she budgeted carefully for law school but that her efforts at budgeting went awry because UH’s tuition kept going up.

Officials with the Texas Access to Justice Commission (TAJC) and two Texas law schools announced at an Oct. 5 news conference that a scholarship program will be implemented at the two schools, beginning in 2005, as part of the TAJC’s five-year strategic plan for addressing poor Texans’ needs for legal services. That program would benefit people like Pontello.

A 2003 report by the American Bar Association Commission on Loan Repayment and Forgiveness indicates that Pontello’s experience is fairly typical. According to the report, “Lifting the Burden: Law Student Debt as a Barrier to Public Service,” the cost of tuition at public law schools for in-state

residents increased 134 percent between 1992 and 2002.

In 2002, almost 87 percent of law students borrowed to finance their legal education and the amount borrowed by many students exceeded \$80,000, the ABA commission reported.

In the report, the ABA commission recommended that law schools offer public service fellowships and scholarships to help alleviate the educational debt burden of law graduates who want to work in public interest settings.

According to a TAJC statement, Baylor University School of Law has committed to fund two Equal Justice Scholarships, collectively valued at \$143,000, and the William Wayne Justice Center for Public Interest Law at the University of Texas School of Law has agreed to fund three scholarships, collectively valued at \$135,000. TAJC started its effort by asking UT and Baylor to provide the scholarships for students who commit to practice law at recognized legal-aid organizations for a minimum of three years after graduation, says Jim Sales, TAJC chairman and a partner in Houston’s Fulbright & Jaworski. But Sales, a UT grad, says he has contacted three other Texas law schools, which he declines to identify because negotiations are ongoing, and plans to contact all nine with hopes that each will participate.

UT law school Dean Bill Powers said UT would implement one scholarship per year over the next three years. Baylor will offer its first scholarship in 2005 and will offer the second scholarship in 2007, Baylor law school Dean Brad Toben said.

Powers said UT offers other scholarships and fellowships for students in the public interest field. With the new program, which pays a student’s full tuition and fees for three years, UT will be able to recruit students to work in public interest law, he said.

“It’s not the end of the road but a good step along the road for providing access to justice for all Texans,” Powers said.

Sales said he’s hopeful other law schools will implement some form of scholarship program to provide more lawyers to

serve low-income Texans. In interviews with five law school deans, *Texas Lawyer* found that some schools plan to offer the scholarships, while others are trying different approaches.

James Alfini, dean of South Texas College of Law, says his school’s board recently authorized the awarding of public interest scholarships, but details for the program have not been finalized. “It’s an idea whose time has come, and we’re going to be there,” Alfini says.

“It’s certainly something that I’m interested in,” UH law school Dean Nancy Rapoport says. “All we have to do is find folks that will finance it for us and we’ll be there.”

Bill Piatt, dean of St. Mary’s University School of Law, says his school is using its resources to provide legal services to the poor through clinical programs and also places students with public interest programs during the summer.

Walter Huffman, dean of Texas Tech University School of Law, says Tech started the Student Public Interest Initiative three years ago and was able to pay “modest” stipends for five law students to work for legal-aid programs this summer.

Huffman says the long-term goal is to have enough money to fund an endowment for scholarships. “We have a ways to go before we can offer scholarships,” he says.

Texas Wesleyan School of Law Dean Fred Slabach says his school would consider seriously any TAJC recommendation but has not been contacted yet about the scholarship program. He says Texas Wesleyan is serious about pro bono work and makes it a graduation requirement for its law students to complete at least 30 hours of pro bono with legal-aid organizations.

Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law Dean John Attanasio and Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law Dean McKen Carrington each did not return a telephone call seeking comment before presstime on Oct. 7.

Mary Alice Robbins’ e-mail address is
mrobbins@texaslawyer.com.