

# inAustin

## PUBLIC INTEREST LAW FELLOWSHIP FOCUSES ON TEEN-AGE VICTIMS

by MARY ALICE ROBBINS

**W**hile some of her classmates will be earning six-figure salaries at major firms, Bronwyn Blake, a soon-to-be-graduate of the University of Texas School of Law, will receive \$37,000 for a year to develop a program to provide legal services to teen victims of violence.

Blake is the first recipient of a faculty-funded fellowship awarded by the William Wayne Justice Center for Public Interest Law at the UT law school. The center announced the fellowship award on April 21, and Blake will begin work on the Teen Justice Initiative in September.

The purpose of the fellowship is to create opportunities for graduating students to work with public interest legal organizations on behalf of under-represented individuals or groups. Blake, who will work under the guidance of the Austin-based Women's Advocacy Project, says she will serve as an attorney for teen-agers who find themselves in abusive relationships and need help.

According to a study that the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics released in October 2001, girls and women between the ages of 16 and 24 are the most vulnerable to domestic violence, experiencing the highest per capita rates of nonfatal intimate partner violence of any group.

Although a minor who is the victim of domestic violence can obtain a protective order in Texas, he or she needs help to do it. Under Texas Family Code §82.992(c), an adult must apply for the order on behalf of the minor, Blake says.

At present, Blake says, there isn't anyone to provide legal services to and assist teen-agers who need to obtain a protective order, because they're being abused.

"I will be that person," Blake says.

Teens often don't even know where to go to get an order, Blake says. As part of the initiative, Blake says she will walk abused teens through the process of obtaining a protective order, accompany them to the County Attorney's Office to fill out an application and go with them to court to secure the order.

Eden Harrington, director of the William Wayne Justice Center, says a committee of law school faculty members selected Blake to receive the fellowship, in part, because supporters of the Teen Justice Initiative could

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develop it into a model approach for use elsewhere in the state.

"Her innovative project with the Women's Advocacy Project has the potential to address serious domestic violence issues affecting teen-agers across Texas," Harrington says.

### A Tremendous Problem

Elizabeth Lippincott, interim executive director of the Women's Advocacy Project, says she envisions Blake's work as a pilot program that other jurisdictions around the state could learn from.

Lippincott says dating violence is a tremendous problem among teen-agers. Teens also may be witnesses to family violence that the abusers could direct toward them, she says.

"There are a lot of teens who need to know how the law can help them," Lippincott says. "We'd like everyone to know they do have access to justice."

Blake, 25, developed the concept for the initiative after spending time working in programs designed to help victims of domestic violence.

"I've always wanted to work with women and children," she says.

Prior to starting law school in the fall of 2002, Blake worked as a volunteer for the Women's Advocacy Project. In 2003, Blake won a Texas law fellowship to work on family violence cases with Assistant District Attorney Gary Cobb in the family justice division of the Travis County District Attorney's Office. In the summer of 2004, she served as a volunteer for Break the Cycle in Washington, D.C., which works on teen dating violence.

Blake says she also took a course on domestic violence and the law and worked as a student attorney in the UT Domestic Violence Clinic.

Her interest in an Austin case also was a factor in Blake's desire to help teen victims of violence. Blake says she has done research on the case of Otralla Mosley, a 15-year-old Austin girl stabbed to death by her 16-year-old former boyfriend in a hallway at Reagan High School in 2003.

Harrington says the UT law faculty contributed more than \$100,000 to help pay the stipends for students who will receive public interest law fellowship awards over the next five years. The law school also kicked in funding for the fellowship program, she says.

Notes Harrington, "It's the first post-graduate fellowship UT has ever had."

