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Dean Bill Powers

University of Texas School of Law

Law Schools Announce Scholarships for Future Legal Aid Lawyers

Baylor University School of Law and the William Wayne Justice Center for Public Interest Law at the University of Texas School of Law have established the Equal Justice Scholarships, which will be awarded to students with strong academic credentials as well as demonstrated commitment to public service. Upon graduation from law school, the scholarship recipients, in accordance with their commitment, will practice law at legal aid organizations for at least three years.

“It is crucial that all law students understand the need to make our legal system available to everyone,” said Dean Bill Powers of the University of Texas School of Law. “Every time a Texan is denied access to justice because they can’t afford it is a tragedy. It is a privilege for us to be involved.

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The Texas Access to Justice Commission, charged with overseeing the legal aid delivery system in Texas, has worked closely with the two law schools to implement the scholarship program. James B. Sales, chair of the Commission and a partner in the Houston office of Fulbright & Jaworski, hopes that other Texas law schools will be encouraged to create similar scholarships.

“Texas law schools have the unique and professionally important opportunity to instill in their students the impor-

ance of affording access to our justice system to all residents of Texas, regardless of their economic status,” Sales said. “These scholarships will afford highly qualified students a free legal career in exchange for a three-year commitment to serving the public good through a legal services provider.

“Once again, U.T. and Baylor have assumed a leadership role in the legal profession’s service to the community and have demonstrated their commitment to equal justice under the law. The Commission is endeavoring to work with all Texas law schools to implement some form of scholarship program that will, in the long term, provide more lawyers to serve poor and low-income Texans.”

According to the American Bar Association, law school graduates carry an average of \$77,000 in school loan debt. Yet, the average entry-level salary for a legal aid attorney is approximately \$36,000 per year.

“Baylor Law School’s program teaches our students that the practice of law is a privilege and with that comes responsibility to be stewards of justice,” said Dean Brad Toben of Baylor Law School. “This scholarship program will make it possible for our graduates to serve where they are truly most needed.”

Currently in Texas, legal aid meets only 25 percent of the legal needs of poor Texans. In 2002, the Commission created the Texas Student Loan Repayment Assistance Program



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP U.T. School of Law Dean Bill Powers, Justice Harriet O’Neill, Judge William Wayne Justice, ATJ Commission Chair James B. Sales, and Baylor School of Law Dean Brad Toben announced the establishment of the Equal Justice Scholarships at a press conference on Tuesday, Oct. 5; Dean Powers; James B. Sales.

to assist legal aid lawyers with law school loan debt. To date, the Commission has provided more than \$45,000 to legal aid lawyers in Texas. The State Bar of Texas recently committed an additional \$70,000 to the program. Despite these efforts, student loan repayment presents a major obstacle to graduates working for legal aid providers.

The Commission has also launched an ambitious five-year strategic plan, which includes the creation of an endowment fund, increasing corporate support, formulating

programs to expand pro bono legal services and engaging law schools in legal aid issues.

Baylor University School of Law has committed to fund two Equal Justice Scholarships, collectively valued at \$143,000. The first scholarship will begin in 2005; the second will begin in 2007. The William Wayne Justice Center at U.T. School of Law has committed to fund three scholarships, collectively valued at \$135,000. U.T. will implement one scholarship each year over the next three years.