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A Break in Routine

Boston College Law School

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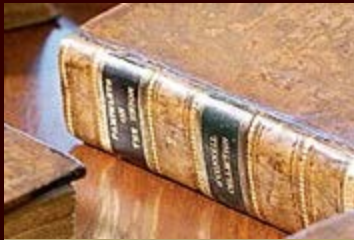


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A Break in Routine

BC LAW SPRING BREAK TRIPS

1/07/05—Mary Holper (BC Law '03), currently an Equal Justice Works Fellow for Capital Area Immigrants' Rights (CAIR) Coalition in Washington, D.C., has fond memories of her participation in BC Law's immigration Spring Break trips as a student, and credits that experience as part of the reason she chose to practice immigration law. So it was a no-brainer for her to agree to supervise a group of current BC Law first-year students on a similar trip to CAIR last year.

"The students were all very responsible, hard-working, and showed a dedication to human rights and the plight of detained non-citizens," Holper writes in a recent email. "My co-workers and I were impressed with their professionalism. The students came to CAIR Coalition with a desire to work, and were motivated to work even harder after sitting face-to-face with the detained non-citizens whom they could assist using their legal skills."

She describes many of the students' experiences while volunteering with CAIR Coalition as "moving;" one student met with a Guinean man who had been detained by the immigration authorities upon expiration of his student visa, but who feared return to his native Guinea. "She sat with him while he cried, fearing return to his country," Holper writes. Another student assisted a Cameroonian asylum-seeker who was detained upon his arrival into the country. "After attending his 'credible fear' interview with an asylum officer, she spent long hours attempting to contact a relative to sponsor him if he were released from jail pending his asylum case."

It is exactly these types of experiences that so profoundly shape the minds of the first-year students who participate in the BC Law Spring Break trips. They spend their days working with lawyers on immigration and asylum cases, working with clients and their families on legal asylum claims. They research law, work with witnesses, and prepare cases for trial. Many of them describe these experiences as life-changing, and some (like Mary Holper) later point to the days spent fighting for the rights of unwanted immigrants as the reason they chose to pursue public service and immigration law as a career.

The trips are part of the BC Law Human Rights Program, particularly under the umbrella of the Boston College Immigration and Asylum Project. But the Director of the Human Rights Program, Professor Daniel Kanstroom, says that the project was originally inspired and organized by students, beginning as a Spring Break service trip around 1988. "It was always a student initiative," says Kanstroom. "Students still primarily organize it, [Professor] Sarah Ignatius and I do a training class before we go, and we help them find placements, and I have often accompanied the group. But the driving force behind it is our remarkable students."

Kanstroom has overseen the project since its inception. In its first year, about ten students, all funded by the dean, traveled to Florida to work with the Haitian Refugee Center and similar organizations in South Florida. This was the only placement for the first few years, until El Paso and other opportunities were added. This year, approximately 30 BC Law students will participate in the trips. Placement locations include Washington, D.C., Harlingen, Texas, Eloy, Arizona, Miami, Florida, and Los Angeles, California. In various venues, many of the current supervising attorneys are former students who have gone through the program. There is also

now an Indian Law Project, modeled on the Immigration program.

"The big issue is cost," Kanstroom says. "The students raise money for the trips by selling hotdogs at football games, and then whatever they raise is matched by the Law School Fund. It's important for students to feel ownership of the project. I think it is important that students understand that doing public interest work is a kind of privilege. There is nothing more rewarding than being able to use your skills to help these clients." Even more imaginative fundraising events have been held in the past, including a benefit concert, where Kanstroom played with his former band.

Matt Tilghman-Havens (BC Law '06) recently worked with the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center. "My primary responsibility was to interview an asylum seeker from a southeast European country and begin to draft her affidavit," he says. "The biggest challenge was to get her story straight, as interpreted by her sister-in-law, and to draw cognizable claims out of it. I also performed research to substantiate her claims that conditions in her country were as threatening as she said they were."

For Tilghman-Havens, and for most of the rest who choose to participate, the reward of helping those in desperate need is well worth the sacrifice of a little time off. "My experience of supervision by practicing attorneys in legal assistance was fantastic. Also, I had the opportunity to visit a detention center and to meet immigration detainees. It was a compelling experience that has spurred a lasting interest in immigration law."

To learn more about the Spring Immigration Trip, visit the program's [Web site](#).