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NEWSLEAF

A PUBLICATION OF THE NORTH CAROLINA LEGAL EDUCATION ASSISTANCE FOUNDATION

LONG WAITING LIST FOR NC LEAF PROGRAM

Demand for assistance outstrips available funds

*By Denise Cumbee Long
 Executive Director, NC LEAF*



EVERY NOVEMBER, scores of public interest attorneys across the state wait anxiously for news that can determine the direction of their careers. No, it's not bar exam results or employment offers, but rather notification of their admittance to NC LEAF's loan repayment assistance program. For many recent law school graduates, whether or not they receive NC LEAF assistance is the "make or break" criteria for how long they can stay in the public interest jobs they love.

Unfortunately, each year due to our limited funds, NC LEAF must turn away many eligible public interest lawyers who apply for help. This means that our November board meetings are occasions of frustration and hard choices, as the board struggles with

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NOW IS THE TIME FOR A YEAR END TAX-DEDUCTIBLE CONTRIBUTION TO NC LEAF!

As you consider your end of the year giving, please keep NC LEAF in mind. We had to turn away almost 50 public interest attorneys working in North Carolina this past fall. They sit on our waiting list, hoping to be admitted to NC LEAF's loan repayment assistance program some time during the next year. Your donation will help us increase the number of young lawyers we are able to serve. They, in turn, will be more likely to stay in public interest jobs that benefit all of North Carolina's citizens. Your support in the form of an individual contribution or a named sponsorship is much needed and will be greatly appreciated!



NC LEAF Helps Public Defenders Recruit "The Brightest And Best"

*James E. Williams, Jr.
 Public Defender, District 15B
 Carrboro*

WHEN ONE VISITS the website of the Office of Indigent Defense Services (IDS), the homepage lists one of the goals of IDS as "the recruitment of the best and brightest North Carolina attorneys to represent indigent defendants." As one of North Carolina's fourteen Public Defenders who serve under the umbrella of IDS, I share their goal of recruiting and retaining committed and qualified attorneys to represent the indigent individual whose life and/or liberty is at stake when accused of crime.

Over the past ten years or so, the task of recruiting and retaining the best and brightest young talent to public defender offices has become increasingly difficult. The primary factor contributing to this difficulty is the ever increasing cost of a law school education. In most instances, law students finance their education with student loans. In some cases, loans exceed eighty thousand dollars upon graduation.

As a result, many young lawyers who desire to work as assistant public defenders are forced to work for law firms or enter private practice. They simply can't afford to live

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insideLEAF

INTRODUCING THE NEW NC LEAF “FELLOWS”

NAMED SPONSORSHIPS (\$2,500 Level)



Elizabeth Holgate
Brooks, Pierce, McLendon, Humphrey & Leonard Fellow

Elizabeth is a 2004 graduate of Indiana University Law School working for the Guilford County Public Defender’s Office. While an undergraduate, she tutored children considered at risk due to their parents’ addictions to drugs or alcohol. This experience was the motivating force behind her decision to go to law school and enter a public service career. Elizabeth writes: “Working at the Public Defender’s Office is a challenging yet rewarding experience. When defendants are herded through the legal process without an understanding of their situation or potential consequences, our legal system fails them. I enjoy researching each client’s uniquely different predicament and helping resolve his or her case.”



Angela Cinski
Hunton & Williams Fellow

Angela is a 2003 graduate of Wake Forest University and works with the Smithfield office of Legal Aid of North Carolina. Angela assists low-income clients with employment, housing, family law, and benefit issues. She became passionate about public interest law after interning at a Legal Aid office as part of her law school clinical program. “I work for Legal Aid because helping the poor through the legal process is tremendously rewarding,” she writes. “Providing legal representation to someone with no money can empower that individual. We can show a client that just because he or she is poor does not mean having to live in deplorable conditions or that he or she can be fleeced out of money from another’s deceptive practices. Hopefully, this sense of empowerment can aid clients in other areas of their lives, as well.”



Jennifer Stuart
Patterson, Dilthey, Clay, Bryson & Anderson, LLP Fellow

Jennifer is a 2003 graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill Law School working with the Legal Aid office in Raleigh. Jennifer writes, “I became interested in public interest work long before law school when I worked on a literacy project as a VISTA volunteer in Gastonia, North Carolina. I have worked with Legal Aid of North Carolina since graduating from law school, first as a Clifton-Everett Fellow in the New Bern/Greenville offices and now as a Battered Immigrant Project Attorney in the Raleigh office. I enjoy working with immigrant survivors of domestic violence all over the state.”



Robin Merrell
Van Winkle, Buck, Wall, Starnes & Davis Fellow

Robin is a 2000 graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill Law School and works with Pisgah Legal Services in Asheville concentrating on landlord/tenant law. She is the Vice President of the Board of Directors of the Affordable Housing Coalition of Asheville and Buncombe County, the Vice President of the Board of Directors of the Community Housing Coalition of Madison County, and serves as a board member of My Sister’s Place (Madison County domestic violence and sexual assault agency). In 2004, Robin wrote “Looking Homeward: the 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness in Asheville and Buncombe County,” at the request of the City of Asheville and Buncombe County. Robin has trained other attorneys, housing providers and code inspection officers on various aspects of landlord/tenant law. In addition to her legal and volunteer work, Robin writes that she “has been known to DJ.”



WHO WILL BE YOUR FELLOW?

NC LEAF has a long waiting list of eligible public interest attorneys needing assistance with law school loans. Won’t you help us help more of them? Please consider a named sponsorship and contact us soon!

NAMED SPONSORSHIPS (\$750 Level)



William Corbett
Janet Ward Black Fellow

Will is a 2003 graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill Law School working with the Legal Aid Society of Northwest North Carolina in Winston-Salem. Prior to his position in Winston, he worked at the New Bern office of Legal Aid of North Carolina. While at UNC, Will served on the Board of the Carolina Law Pro Bono Program, including one year as President. Even before attending law school, he knew he wanted to be a Poverty Lawyer. Will writes “While working as a paralegal at a San Francisco law firm, I assisted attorneys doing pro bono service through the Lawyer’s Committee on Civil Rights and as an advocate with the Homeless Advocacy Project. Those opportunities made me determined to do whatever I could to ensure that all people receive adequate legal representation. It is my intention to continue working to provide legal assistance to low-income populations as long as I practice law.”

He was a member of the Carolina Law Chapter of Phi Alpha Delta, the national legal service fraternity, and also participated in the Community Legal Project at the Women’s Center in Chapel Hill. Matthew writes, “No matter what crime a defendant is accused of committing, everyone is entitled to a fair trial. Too often, society at large is frantic just to punish someone, with little concern for ensuring that convictions are legitimized by fair trials. In spite of the urge for hurried justice, it is the responsibility of all attorneys and judges in the criminal justice system to work diligently to ensure that defendants’ rights are protected.”



Denise Lockett
Patterson Harkavy Fellow

Denise is a 1998 graduate of UNC Law School and serves as the Managing Attorney at the Boone office of Legal Aid of North Carolina. She worked in private practice until 2001 when she accepted a position with Legal Aid of N.C. in Raleigh. Denise was formerly a volunteer with Interact, a nonprofit domestic violence advocacy organization in Wake County. It was her work there as a victim’s advocate that made her consider a legal profession. While at law school, she was involved in several public service student groups, including the Workers Rights Project, the Paper Chase, Women in Law, and Habitat for Humanity. Denise left private practice to pursue a dream. She writes, “My private practice wasn’t as rewarding as working for the public benefit in a nonprofit assisting indigent persons who cannot otherwise afford counsel with crucial matters such as children’s well-being, housing, and other issues. Now I’m at Legal Aid, and I love it!”



Mashanda Mosley
Maxwell, Freeman & Bowman Fellow

Mashanda is a 2001 graduate of NC Central University School of Law and works at the Hillsborough office of Legal Aid of North Carolina as a family law attorney. She became interested in public service after her work experiences with the North Central Legal Assistance Program in Durham and the Civil Litigation Clinic at NCCU. While at the clinic, she was able to represent clients with family law, landlord/tenant and consumer issues. Mashanda writes, “I do what I do because I believe that it is important to help individuals who have been typically overlooked or ignored simply because they are poor.

Hopefully I provide a voice for my clients, who in many cases would not have a voice. I enjoy what I do because everyday I feel like I am involved in high impact work, whether it is helping a woman get a protective order or protecting the custody of her children.”



Shazia Anwar
Kuniholm Law Firm Fellow

Shazia is a 2004 graduate of UNC Law School working with the Charlotte office of Legal Aid of North Carolina. She also holds down two part-time jobs in order to pay bills and make loan payments. After law school and while studying for the bar, Shazia volunteered with Legal Services of the Southern Piedmont, helping people with serious illness and few resources secure disability benefits and food stamps. She writes, “The satisfaction I got from doing humanitarian work was overwhelming and changed my career vision. I now help survivors of domestic violence get protective orders and custody of their children. While I realize that not every client will be a success story, I feel fortunate that I get to look forward to a long career in helping women begin to reclaim their lives.”



Matthew Wunsche
McMillan, Smith & Plyler Fellow

Matthew is a 2003 graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill Law School working as an Assistant Appellate Defender at the state Office of the Appellate Defender. Matthew’s career choice was only the logical next step in his long path of community service work.

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attempting to admit as many attorneys as possible while balancing criteria such as profession, geography, law school, debt load, and financial need. This year was particularly agonizing as we received 57 applications for assistance, the highest number in NC LEAF's history, and were only able to admit 8 new participants into the program.



Those newly admitted 8 participants join the 77 public interest attorneys currently receiving help from NC LEAF with their law school debt, swelling the number of public interest lawyers on our rolls to 85. Participating NC LEAF attorneys will receive more than \$295,000 in loan repayment assistance this coming year, quite a change from our first year of operation some fourteen years ago when NC LEAF was only able to provide 12 public interest lawyers with a little over \$12,000!

Yet, even though NC LEAF leads the nation in the amount of funding disbursed to public interest attorneys, we are still over \$100,000 short of what we need to help all eligible North Carolina lawyers who apply for assistance. This means that scores of Legal Aid and nonprofit lawyers, Assistant Public Defenders and Assistant District Attorneys sit on NC LEAF's lengthy waiting list, hoping for a slot to open up or additional funds to become available. Some will be forced to leave public interest work for higher paying jobs in the private sector. A loan payment of \$900 a month, coupled with household bills, presents an insurmountable financial obstacle for someone making a salary in the low to mid-thirties.

What's the answer to this problem? First, NC LEAF needs more state funding. The General Assembly has recognized the need for educational incentive programs for those entering professions such as teaching, nursing, or dental services who

assist underserved populations or regions in the state. Fittingly, the state has appropriated millions of dollars through the State Education Authority for loan and grant assistance to persons in these professions. However, NC LEAF's annual appropriation from the state has remained at \$271,000 for the past two years. Though grateful for state support, we urge North Carolina legislators to raise our appropriation to at least \$350,000. This is a relatively small state investment that would have tremendous impact on increasing the number of public interest attorneys assisted by NC LEAF which in turn benefits all citizens of North Carolina.

Second, NC LEAF needs more support from the state's private legal community. Our recently launched named sponsorship initiative provides a way for private firms, legal organizations, or bar association groups to partially underwrite the annual cost of helping a participating NC LEAF attorney with debt repayment assistance for three years. Sponsorship levels vary according to firm size or an organization's membership. In the past few months, four large firms, six smaller ones, and two professional associations have committed to three-year sponsorships. This issue of NEWSLEAF highlights them and the Fellows they have chosen to sponsor. We are deeply grateful for their support and hope that many more private firms and legal organizations will follow their example, thus allowing us to bring on board more and more of the public interest attorneys languishing on our waiting list.

Finally, NC LEAF needs more contributions from concerned individuals who care about our mission and work. As Former Chief Justice Henry Frye says so well, "It is critical that members of the Bar, both as individuals and as private firms, invest in the continued success of NC LEAF. Helping LEAF ease financial impediments for graduates pursuing public service legal careers is good for everyone!"

PUBLIC DEFENDERS RECRUIT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

off the \$33,000 starting salary that many entry level assistant public defenders receive and also repay these tremendous loans. Talented, passionate, potential public interest lawyers are being squeezed out of the public service arena.

NC LEAF is the good news in this story. Over the past eight years or so, I have been able to hire several attorneys who would have been forced to choose private practice without LEAF's assistance. Instead, with NC LEAF's help, they were able to begin their legal careers protecting and defending our constitutional rights by advocating for the indigent defendants who can't afford to hire counsel.

While I don't have an attorney on staff at the present time who is receiving NC LEAF assistance, I do have an attorney who received loan repayment help from LEAF in the past. Retention of good attorneys is just as important as recruitment. Without NC LEAF, it is likely that this attorney would have

had to leave us in order to meet increasing financial obligations. In addition, one of the young attorneys that I hired recently is looking forward to submitting an application for NCLEAF assistance. Such assistance would enable her to continue doing what she is inspired to do - advocating for the indigent defendant.

Based upon conversations I have had with other Public Defenders, most of them either presently have an attorney or have had employees in the past who benefited from NC LEAF. This program's continued vitality is important in our ongoing efforts to recruit and retain talented and committed young attorneys. The assistance provided by NC LEAF benefits not just individual attorneys but the hundreds of clients those attorneys represent who are in desperate need of quality representation from public interest lawyers like assistant public defenders. I encourage my fellow members of the legal profession to do all that we can to ensure the continued strength and viability of NC LEAF.



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