



Johan Byssainthe and Fred Rooney

Launching Careers

Going into court and making an argument before the judge and jury usually requires admittance to the bar—plus a thick skin and zealous commitment to clients. “I was in court every Wednesday, arguing and negotiating with other attorneys, and sometimes even getting yelled at,” said Johan Byssainthe, a 2009 CUNY Law grad who had a unique opportunity to represent clients prior to being admitted to the bar. “I was there before the judge arguing on my client’s behalf to resolve each case.” The experience for

Byssainthe was revealing: “This experience definitely confirmed I want to litigate. It turns out that I’m pretty zealous.”

Byssainthe and 11 other 2009 CUNY Law grads were initiated into their legal careers through LaunchPad for Justice, a first-in-the-nation program introduced in conjunction with the New York State Courts. Through CUNY Law’s LaunchPad, recent grads had the opportunity to represent clients *before* being admitted to the New York State Bar.

This unusual arrangement was made possible through spe-

cial practice orders signed by the Appellate Division—Second Department and Appellate Division—First Department. The practice orders enabled recent grads, called “justice fellows,” to appear and represent clients in Civil Court through the “Volunteer Lawyers for a Day” (VLFD) program, prior to getting their bar exam results and being admitted to practice.

In keeping with their public interest mission, CUNY Law graduates represented low-income New Yorkers facing eviction, foreclosure, and landlords who refused to repair heating systems, hot water systems, and other essentials. Justice fellows underwent rigorous training and supervision by attorneys in CUNY Law’s Community Legal Resource Network (CLRN) and court-employed attorneys.

“We started out shadowing attorneys and observing them in court. Then we moved on to a series of continuing legal education classes in housing law,” said Byssainthe, who is now a staff attorney at the Legal Aid Society of New York in the Civil Practice’s Housing Unit. “The program allowed us to help clients figure out their defense,” she said, adding that if the students hadn’t been there, “many clients wouldn’t be aware of all of their rights.”

According to Byssainthe, more than 100 low-income New Yorkers were represented by CUNY Law justice fellows, including an elderly woman facing sudden eviction. Never behind in her rent payments, she found that a series of hospital emergencies left her in arrears. On a fixed income, she found herself suddenly unable to manage her affairs. “Through our work, we were able to explore the need for adult protective services to help her with financial management,” explained Byssainthe.

“The landlord was only concerned with payment and not concerned about what caused the trouble and how to fix the situation,” she added. “We look at the whole person and, when needed, we help them identify extra resources that can help them get out of the situation and hopefully not get back into it.” Other cases involve tenants whose landlords don’t make repairs that are needed for apartments to be livable, and potential foreclosures.

Fred Rooney, director of CLRN, brought the pioneering idea of pairing intensive on-the-job training with helping courts serve low-income clients to Judge Fern Fisher, deputy chief administrative judge for New York City Courts and director of the New York State Courts Access to Justice pro-

gram. “This unique collaboration accomplishes three goals,” said Rooney. “Through LaunchPad, we serve low-income New Yorkers often in crisis situations, while at the same time giving CUNY Law grads an opportunity to gain valuable work experience in a tough job market. Third,” he said, “the already overloaded courts get help from the justice fellows.”

LaunchPad dovetails with the highly successful VLFD program established by Judge Fisher’s office in 2006, which allows volunteer attorneys, trained by the Court, to provide “unbundled” legal services that address the immense unmet legal needs of low-income New Yorkers. Through unbundled legal services, lawyers provide some, but not all, of the work involved in traditional, full-service representation. Clients are able to choose the legal assistance they need and perform the remaining tasks on their own.

In announcing the New York Court’s collaboration with CUNY Law, Judge Fisher cited her “complete confidence” in CUNY Law justice fellows and said CUNY Law’s “intensive clinical program has primed them to work with litigants and to quickly grasp the skills they need to be effective in court.” In looking at the needs of low-income New Yorkers, Judge Fisher added that “their efforts will go far in helping those without access to legal representation.”

New York State Chief Justice Jonathan Lippman echoed these sentiments, saying, “I am pleased to announce this important partnership, the benefits of which will be numerous and far-reaching. LaunchPad for Justice will provide CUNY Law School graduates with the chance to build their resumes with real-world experience; the

courts with additional aid in dealing with heavy caseloads; and low-income New Yorkers engaged with the court system the legal counsel they desperately need.”

Justice fellows were paid a small stipend, and legislative funds for the program were obtained through the efforts of New York State Assembly Members Adriano Espaillat and Hakeem Jeffries of the 72nd and 57th Districts, respectively, and covered costs for helping constituents in their districts. Rooney, who is seeking funding to continue the program for CUNY Law’s 2010 graduates, said he’s hopeful that one day CUNY Law can work with the courts to provide programs like LaunchPad throughout the five boroughs. “Given the talents of our graduates, the overburdened courts, and the needs of low-income New Yorkers, we are working hard to expand this program citywide,” he said. ●●

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