The School’s new Public Service Project matches law students with opportunities to serve the community.

by Deb Aronson

I believe that lawyers have an obligation to give back to their community,” says Patavee Vanadilok, third-year student and president of the Student Bar Association. “And it’s important to instill that habit of public service work early.”

Washington University School of Law is doing just that through its Public Service Project. The project grew out of a five-year plan adopted by the School of Law’s faculty. Among other things, faculty members felt that the School should have an increased focus on public service opportunities for students. Although the law school has a long tradition of public service work, the Public Service Project makes it easier for students to find out about volunteering opportunities. The project also will hold a recognition ceremony for volunteers at the end of each academic year.

Students can find volunteer opportunities in every area of law—from civil rights and constitutional issues, domestic violence and child abuse, AIDS/HIV issues, and environmental issues to community development, real estate and land use, intellectual property, immigration, housing, and poverty issues. Before the Public Service Project was established this academic year, the problem was how to link interested students with interested organizations.

“Law school students are so busy that you have to make it easy for them to get started,” says Liz Pejeau, JD ’00, coordinator of the Public Service Project. “Just because they’re not doing volunteer work doesn’t mean they’re not interested.”

At the beginning of this academic year, Pejeau received more than 80 responses to a questionnaire about volunteer opportunities she had distributed to students. “I thought that the first-year students would be the most active and interested, but I was surprised at how many responses I got from second- and third-years,” she notes.

Since starting in her new position one week before the start of the 2000–01 academic year, Pejeau has surveyed the student body about what areas of community service interest them. She has also lined up numerous firms and agencies to offer as many student volunteer opportunities as possible.

In addition, she co-sponsors events with student groups already active at the law school. Those events include one-time service activities and talks by lawyers and others active in the public service field. Pejeau also organized a public service fair on November 8, 2000. More than 40 organizations participated in the one-day event, which served as a clearinghouse for students interested in community service. She is hoping this fair will become an annual event.

“The Public Service Project validates volunteer work by formalizing it and by providing recognition at the end of the year,” says Vanadilok, who has participated in the Law-Related Education Initiative in which law students teach fourth- and fifth-graders about legal concepts. “Law school is not just about building skills in trial work, legal analysis, research, and writing; it’s also about cultivating the habit of doing public service.”