

## Clinic Alumni Find Common Cause in Legal Assistance Foundation

**BEVERLY YANG, JD '06**, was forever changed by her experience in the Civil Rights & Community Justice Clinic.

“It’s where I learned the day-to-day practice of law. By co-counseling cases at Legal Services of Eastern Missouri, I learned that I wanted to advocate for justice on behalf of people who usually don’t have a fair shake in court,” says Yang, who now works as a staff attorney with the Land of Lincoln Legal Assistance Foundation in Alton, Illinois.

Yang is among several Washington University law graduates who staff the Land of Lincoln office in Alton. She is joined by staff attorneys and alumni Benjamin Bozicevic, JD '07, and Clarissa Gaff, JD '06, and one-year AmeriCorps attorney Linda Jun, JD '10. The office’s longtime managing attorney is Joan Spiegel, JD '81, also an alumna and a highly respected public interest lawyer in Illinois.

While in law school, Yang, Gaff, and Jun were members of Professor Karen Tokarz’s Civil Rights & Community Justice Clinic, and Bozicevic interned in South Africa through the Africa Public Interest Law Initiative. Drawing on these experiences in law school and then at the Land of Lincoln, Yang, Gaff, and Bozicevic are now supervising current members of Tokarz’s Civil Rights & Community Justice Clinic.

Gaff says that her experience in the clinic helped prepare her for practice as well as garner her position at Land of Lincoln. “It is thrilling for us to now be in a position to pass on what we have learned to current clinic students,” she says. “We know how valuable the clinic experience was for us and can be for them, so we are very invested in their development.

“It is also very satisfying to have the opportunity to continue to work with Professor Tokarz on projects such as financial literacy and mortgage loan foreclosure mediation,” she adds.

Students choose the opportunity to extern with Land of Lincoln to join in providing “high-quality, free legal assistance to poor people,” says Spiegel, and to have the opportunity to work with experienced lawyers on important issues.

According to Yang, their office provides clinic students with a view of society they don’t always recognize: “While clinic students may expect to interview clients and be in the courtroom, they aren’t always prepared for exposure to the difficult conditions in which our clients live. Our clinic students may see more poverty during the course of our representation than they ever thought the U.S. could harbor.”

Learning new perspectives about clients, client community problems, and the legal system is part of the hands-on legal experience that clinic students crave when they come to Alton. “They interview and counsel clients, research issues, draft pleadings, provide community education, and go to court with us,” Spiegel says. “They do pretty much what a new public interest lawyer would do, but under close supervision.”



Seasoned civil rights attorney Joan Spiegel, JD '81, right, mentors law alumni and students at the Land of Lincoln office in Alton, Illinois. The former externs and now attorneys, pictured above, were all Professor Tokarz’ students in either the Civil Rights & Community Justice Clinic or the Africa Public Interest Law Initiative. Front row, from left: Beverly Yang, JD '06, and Spiegel; middle row, from left: Linda Jun, JD '10, and recent clinic student Natasha Love Rogers; and back row, from left: Benjamin Bozicevic, JD '07, and Clarissa Gaff, JD '06.

MARY BUNYUS

## RESEARCH EXCERPT

**Karen Tokarz**, Charles Nagel Professor of Public Interest Law & Public Service; Director, Dispute Resolution Program; and Director, Civil Rights & Community Justice Clinic

“Conversations on ‘Community Lawyering’: The Newest (Oldest) Wave in Clinical Education” (with N. Cook, S. Brooks, & B. Bloom), 28 *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy* 359 (2008)

“Community lawyering is an *approach* to the practice of law and to clinical legal education that centers on building and sustaining relationships with clients, over time, *in context*, as a part of and in conjunction *with* communities. It incorporates a respect for clients that empowers them and assists them in the larger economic, political, and social contexts of their lives, beyond their immediate legal problems. This approach contemplates a significantly different role for lawyers and clients than that in traditional law practice (and, perhaps, in traditional clinical law practice)—one in which the client community or community groups are the protagonists in framing and resolving their concerns, and lawyers act as team members, working both for and with clients.”

Spiegel adds that the student attorneys learn what it’s really like to engage in client advocacy, negotiation, administrative practice, litigation, and community education. For example, she says, the students might help a client get public medical insurance or Social Security disability benefits, keep public housing, and/or prevent an eviction.

**SPIEGEL ADMITS** that the work can be wearing. “Our clients often come to us with many problems, beyond simple legal matters,” she says. “Poverty, legal problems, and mental illness are frequently combined, making resolution of the legal issues all the more challenging. We also deal with victims of violence who’ve lost confidence in their ability to function outside the control of their abuser.”

“When we defend an eviction or foreclosure, not only do we help our clients and their families avoid homelessness, we also help ensure the continuity of their children’s education and the family’s financial stability,” Yang adds. “Often, our clients cannot afford market rent and are receiving help from the government just to remain housed. It would be a monumental loss if they were evicted and lost their eligibility for subsidized housing.”

Because above all the attorneys want to help their clients, being unable to address some of the legal and nonlegal issues can be tough. “We as lawyers have to learn the limits of what the legal system can do and how to be creative at pushing those

boundaries,” Yang says. “We also have to develop partnerships with social service agencies when the system doesn’t identify a legal injustice that we can negotiate or litigate. It’s hard to tell a client that the law provides no recourse or remedies for her situation.”

Nevertheless, the work delivers many feel-good moments mixed in with the difficult cases. “My favorite part of the job is the client interaction,” says Bozicevic, a staff attorney specializing in subsidized housing and public benefits issues. “Being able to assist those in need, whether helping clients maintain their subsidized housing or obtain important public benefits, can give you the highest of highs. But the work has its low points as well; unfortunately you can’t always help every client.”

“For students, the experience of representing a client for the first time can provide the ‘Ah ha!’ moment where they realize why they wanted to become a lawyer in the first place,” says Yang. “Together, we show our clients, who often don’t trust any authority—especially the legal system—that there’s justice for them, even if they are a marginalized part of society.

“And, we can share with the students what Professor Tokarz taught us about the impact lawyers can have on people’s lives and help them to understand the power and privilege of lawyering,” she adds. ■■■



Surrounded by her recent clinic students, Professor Karen Tokarz, center, gained national and international recognition for the Clinical Education Program during her nearly three decades as its director. She currently directs the Dispute Resolution Program and Civil Rights & Community Justice Clinic, as well as coordinates the Africa Public Interest Law Initiative and the International Justice & Conflict Resolution Practicum with Professor Leila Nadya Sadat.