Three public service students at Washington University School of Law feel fortunate. They were chosen as the first recipients of stipends from the David M. Becker Public Service Fund. As a result, Caroline Bourland, Brendan Roediger, and Jennifer Szczucinski spent last summer pursuing their career passions in public service through volunteer internships that their own checking accounts never could have supported. The stipends are designed to cover basic living expenses so students can gain valuable experience at legal aid organizations and district attorney’s offices, which usually cannot afford to pay summer interns.

Bourland, now a third-year law student, served as a summer intern with the Association of the Bar of the City of New York Fund’s Legal Clinic for the Homeless. One of the cases for which she was given responsibility involved an elderly man suffering multiple health problems who was denied public housing by the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) because of a previous criminal conviction. He had pleaded guilty, according to Bourland, in part because of a lack of adequate counsel.

While Bourland pursued a drawn-out appeals process, she also assisted in drafting a letter to the administrative hearing officer who had presided over the original case, asking him to review the facts. No NYCHA hearing officer had done this before. Within a month, Bourland’s supervisor was notified that the hearing officer not only had reviewed the case, but had approved her client’s request for public housing.

“The only thing I can imagine being more exciting is if I could actually see our client moving into his new apartment.”

Following her graduation this May, Bourland plans to pursue a career in either homeless/tenant law or asylum/immigration law in New York City. The professional contacts made during this internship, she says, were invaluable.

“Without the Becker Public Service Fund, I would not have been able to take this internship,” she says. “New York City is the most expensive place to live in the country. The Becker fellowship was the only financial support I received for the summer and the sole reason why I was able to complete the internship.”

For Roediger, now a second-year law student, interning with the Philadelphia Defender Association’s Death Penalty Project last summer was his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. “I wanted to do death penalty work, but there aren’t a lot of opportunities for first-year law students,” according to Roediger, who plans to pursue a career in either legal aid or public defense.

“Here’s nothing more gratifying than having your name tied to the generosity of others who are supporting people dedicated to important work.” David Becker

“The Becker fellowship was the only financial support I received for the summer and the sole reason why I was able to complete the internship.”

Caroline Bourland

“[I] got a feel for how public defender offices operate and what it takes to be a good public defender.”

Brendan Roediger

David Becker (second from the left) meets with stipend recipients (from the left) Caroline Bourland, Jennifer Szczucinski, and Brendan Roediger.
His internship duties included researching the impact of race on sentencing determinations in Pennsylvania, on juror selection, and on peremptory challenges. Roediger also assisted in the preparation of a pleading to extend to juveniles the ruling of the Supreme Court of the United States in *Atkins v. Virginia* that bans the execution of the mentally retarded.

“Interning with the Philadelphia Defender's Association Death Penalty Project was a spectacular experience,” he wrote in his internship report. “I learned a lot about substantive law in a rather short period of time. More importantly, however, I got a feel for how public defender offices operate and what it takes to be a good public defender.”

Roediger also got a chance to see the human side of public defenders dealing with death penalty cases. He lived with two attorneys who worked in the office. “I saw the emotional fortitude that these attorneys have,” he says. “Only doctors have to deal with the same consequences of not doing their jobs well.”

Szczucinski, now a third-year law student, interned last summer with the St. Louis Circuit Attorney's Office, working primarily with the Domestic Violence and Sex Crimes/Child Abuse Units. Trying misdemeanor cases under the supervision of a practicing attorney, “I developed so many skills,” Szczucinski says. “I presented cases to a judge who was not sympathetic to domestic violence. I had to try to convince the judge that these cases were real.”

Szczucinski tried the first domestic violence misdemeanor case won by the unit all summer.

“The victim began crying and hugging me, thanking me profusely, telling me she could finally go on with her life and be safe,” Szczucinski wrote in her internship report. “This experience made me realize that I had played an integral role in obtaining justice for this woman.

“Even in all the cases that I worked on but lost, the women (victims) thought someone was on their side and believed them,” she continued in her report. “Technically, we're representing the state; but in abuse and sex crimes, we're really representing the victim.”

Following her graduation this May, Szczucinski hopes to work in the St. Louis Circuit Attorney's Office and eventually be placed in one of the special units handling cases of domestic violence, sex crimes, or child abuse.

Established in November 2002, the David M. Becker Public Service Fund, which made it possible for these students to follow their passions without financial hardship, honors the School of Law's associate dean for external relations and the Joseph H. Zumbalen Professor of the Law of Property. This fund reached its $1 million goal in November 2003, just one year after it was officially announced.

Charles Newman, JD '73, a partner at Bryan Cave LLP in St. Louis, first approached Joel Seligman, dean and the Ethan A.H. Shepley University Professor, in spring 2002 about establishing the fund in honor of Becker's 40 years of continuous teaching at the School of Law. Seligman, the School's development officers, and a small group of alumni handled the fundraising, according to Newman, who is not surprised that the goal was met so quickly.

“David Becker is the most beloved and best-known faculty member in the recent history of the School of Law,” Newman says. “His 40 years of excellence and devotion as a teacher and his expertise in real property law are exceeded only by his graciousness and concern for students and colleagues.”

Becker says he is pleased with the School's selection for the fund's first stipend recipients.

“It's tremendously satisfying to hear about what this has meant to these students,” he says. “There's nothing more gratifying than having your name tied to the generosity of others who are supporting people dedicated to important work.”

Becker believed that the fund's goal would be met—sometime in his lifetime. The quick response, he says, supports his overall belief in the generosity and volunteerism exhibited by members of the legal profession employed in both the public and private sectors.

“As a group, lawyers do more of this than anybody,” Becker says. “We need to continue this tradition.”