2013 Summer SPIL and O’Brien Fellowship Stipend Reports

The Catholic University Of America
Columbus School of Law

— Washington, DC —
What Does Public Interest Money Actually Fund?

Every February they appear on schedule: rows of tables in the law school’s atrium displaying donated goods that are up for silent auction bids from interested members of the community.

The annual fundraiser for Student for Public Interest Law (SPIL), set for Friday, Feb. 7 this year, is a cherished tradition that has also proven itself an indispensable tool for furnishing summer stipends to Catholic University law school students who want to take public service jobs that benefit others, but who need a minimum bed of financial support to do so.

The highly anticipated live SPIL auction, preceded by a week of silent auction bidding, is a fun, highly-charged and labor intensive affair that raised a total of more than $90,000 in 2013, a sum that included a sizeable matching grant from the law school. The money was distributed on a competitive basis among students who presented their case for embracing a particular cause or public service employer during the summer of 2013.

A similar mechanism, the Charles and Louise O’Brien Fellowship, also provides grants for selected students completing the first or the second year of law school in conjunction with their work at a pro bono assignment during the summer. Currently, each student chosen has received a grant of $6,000.

What do students elect to do, supported by a SPIL stipend or O’Brien Fellowship grant to pursue their career passion for a summer?

Below are 15 examples from the summer of 2013. In every case, the student’s chosen path was made possible by a modest level of financial support. Please help make next summer’s opportunities possible by supporting the 2014 SPIL Auction.

Daniela Chavez – 4N  
Brittni Downs – 3L  
Hilary Eisenberg – 3L  
Ashton Hupman – 2L  
Emily Ittner – 2L  
Alexandra Jenik – 2L  
Christiana Lockwood – 2L  
Emily Malone – 3L  
Alexandra Marshall – 2L  
Melissa Mathieu – 2L  
Emma Noftz – 3L  
Katherine Somers – 3L  
David Steenburg – 3L  
Holly Vandegrift - 3L  
Caitlyn Yuschak – 2L
This past summer I interned at the Montgomery County State’s Attorney’s Office for the Circuit Court in the Family Violence Division (FVD). Prosecution at the Circuit Court level involves felony offenses, and in my experience this past summer, that included child neglect, child sexual abuse, child abuse, domestic violence, and elder abuse.

I worked closely with a number of the FVD attorneys in a separate building from the main State’s Attorney’s Office. The FVD attorneys work in the Family Justice Center (FJC), which also houses the many key players, both public and private, involved in family violence type cases. Sheriffs, detectives, and police officers specializing in domestic violence, child abuse and elder abuse have offices at the FJC, as well as victim-witness coordinators, legal assistants, social workers and therapists. The rationale behind having all of these various key players in one location is so that the entire process for victims of family violence is facilitated within this “one-stop shop.”

Without the SPIL stipend I would not have been able to so readily accept this amazing summer position at the Montgomery County State’s Attorney’s Office. My first summer legal internship the year prior had to be part-time in order for me to earn money through another part-time job. This past summer, however, I did not want to take on a paying internship that I was not passionate about, nor truncate my internship work for financial reasons. I was fortunate enough to receive the stipend, and that enabled me to intern full-time for the FVD attorneys and do work that epitomizes public interest law, as the prosecution of violent criminals directly benefits the community as a whole. I gained an invaluable experience in an area of law that is of great interest to me this past summer. I also developed wonderful relationships with attorneys and other staff members at the State’s Attorney’s Office, which has allowed me to secure letters of recommendation and references. This internship solidified my desire to work in public interest law, and that is what I will be doing upon graduation, and hopefully into the future. The positive experiences and valuable relationships I gained at this internship are all thanks to the SPIL stipend that truly allowed for it all to take place.
This summer, as a SPIL Stipend recipient, I had the pleasure of working at the Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia (PDS). Being that I am pursuing a career in public defense, this was the perfect opportunity to immerse myself in the atmosphere that I one day hope to practice in. I truly could not have had a better experience! PDS attorneys are known to be “Champions of Liberty,” and for an entire summer I was able to take part in that mission. From the moment I began my internship I was thrown into the life of a public defender—going to visit clients at the DC Jail, writing motions, conducting client interviews, going to court, conducting legal research, and most importantly, preparing for trial. The most influential part of my internship was experiencing how much work it takes to successfully take a criminal case to trial. I experienced first-hand the early mornings, late nights, and unpredictable nature in which a trial unfolds. Although it was difficult and very tiring, it could not have been more worth it. The attorney that I worked for, the investigation team, and I ended up getting the best possible outcome for the client—and that is what it’s all about! As a public defender, you hold someone’s life and future in your hands; there was nothing more rewarding than seeing how thankful the client and his family were for all the hard work we did on his case.

My experience this summer at PDS just reinforced that public defense is the perfect career for me. The attorneys at PDS, and public defenders everywhere, fight every day to give hope to the people who are most often overlooked in our society. Public defense can be a thankless job, but it is an unbelievable feeling to know that you are helping people who need it the most every single day that you walk into work. To be able to get long-term, practical experience in this field was invaluable, and I will carry everything that I learned during my internship into my own practice in the future. Not only was my internship at PDS exciting, but it was also incredibly humbling and fulfilling. For these reasons, I encourage anyone who is remotely interested in public interest work to explore that interest as soon as possible—you will not regret it!
As a SPIL Stipend recipient for Summer 2013, I was able to work with the DC Appleseed Center of Law and Justice. DC Appleseed is an established non-profit organization that focuses on issues unique to the District of Columbia, working to solve problems specific to city residents. Set up to address a multitude of local concerns, DC Appleseed divides their efforts into projects specifically directed towards policy initiatives. Some DC Appleseed projects are focused on local political reform, such as the DC Revenue Project, which advocates for DC budget autonomy, or the DC Voting Rights Project, which aims to get representation for DC in Congress. Most of the DC Appleseed projects focus on local social issues, such as addressing the HIV/AIDS issue in DC, programming for aiding the working poor, improving the Anacostia River Waterfront, creating affordable housing, and improving special education programs in DC Public Schools. DC Appleseed also is involved the ongoing Carefirst BlueCrossBlueShield initiative, which works to ensure that Carefirst complies with their obligation to use their surplus funding for public works.

DC Appleseed is a non-profit organization that is mainly funded by donations and various grants. While they do have a small staff, they are effective because they collaborate with large firms who contribute help on a pro-bono basis, as well as other professional organizations depending on the nature of the program. For that reason, DC Appleseed values their volunteer support, which includes student legal interns. As a result, while DC Appleseed would provide me with fantastic opportunities to gain legal experience in a non-profit setting, because of their non-profit setup they would not be able to pay their interns. For this reason, my SPIL stipend allowed me to pursue an opportunity that would not only be a fantastic learning experience, but would also allow me to give back to my local area.

I chose DC Appleseed for a variety of reasons. I grew up in the DC area, and I wanted to be able to give back to the city I call home. Additionally, social reform is important to me, and I wanted to be able to participate in the legal context. Finally, while I had a vague idea of my intended area of practice, I was still largely undecided. DC Appleseed offered broad opportunities, as their projects covered a wide varied of issues. For this reason, I saw DC Appleseed as the perfect fit.

My experience allowed me to work on a variety of issues, including advocacy for DC budget autonomy, local healthcare initiative, affordable housing programming, and local voting rights. I found this internship to be incredibly enlightening, and full of substantive assignments. I was responsible for submitting memoranda detailing my legal research, writing testimony, and aiding in project reports, as well as participating in fundraising and community outreach efforts. While I regularly immersed myself in areas of law that was new to me, I learned a great deal about administrative law generally. Through DC Appleseed’s collaborations with local large law firms, I was able to observe the legal community’s dedication to pro-bono work. And, overall, I was able to do fulfilling work that had a positive impact on the community that would not have been possible without the financial support provided by my SPIL stipend.
Thanks to the support and financial assistance from the 2013 SPIL Stipend Program, I spent the summer interning for The Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC). CLINIC is a legal non-profit focused on addressing the emergent and rapidly developing needs of indigent and low-income immigrants here in the United States. CLINIC is a subsidiary of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and its initiatives encompass a network of non-profit organizations and affiliates who provide community based support, programming, advocacy, and legal aide services in their communities.

As a Legal Intern in CLINIC’s Advocacy Section, my daily tasks and projects included reviewing government regulations and policy memos and researching and drafting opinion memos for CLINIC and USCCB staff. I regularly corresponded with CLINIC affiliates, researching specific topics of interest and assisting with individual case inquiries. The CLINIC staff allowed me to accompany them to meetings, seminars and events with U.S.C.I.S, Catholic Charities, and the National Immigration Law Center, to name a few. I was also fortunate enough to take part in CLINIC’s 16th Annual Convening. The theme of the conference, “A Celebration of Service, Justice & Faith,” provided a meaningful opportunity to witness and learn from the work of the participants from other charitable immigration programs around the country and from the conference presentations and workshops.

Interning with CLINIC was a particularly significant experience due to the great push toward comprehensive immigration reform seen in Congress this past summer. Through my work with CLINIC, I was immersed in the flurry of activity and excitement within the immigration field leading up the Senate’s passage of its bipartisan immigration bill, the first attempt at an overhaul to the immigration system in over 25 years.

My experiences working for a non-profit advocacy organization as well as the opportunities I was had to learn and engage in the field of immigration law were invaluable to my continued legal education. These were made possible through the support of the SPIL program and its commitment to provide legal services to under represented causes and to enable students to further their ambitions in public interest law.
Prior to law school, I was a teacher for four years. My first three years were spent in Oakland, California, where I was a member of the Teach for America Program. After three years in Oakland, I served as a volunteer English teacher in Quito, Ecuador. Both of these experiences inspired me to go to law school and to continue working for social justice. However, in true law student fashion, I continued to analyze my choice to attend law school. Will I directly impact my client’s lives? Will I continue to work “in the trenches” as an attorney? Will law school really be worth the cost? After serving as the Family Law Extern at Neighborhood Legal Services Program (NLSP), I can now answer all of these questions with a confident “yes”.

When I arrived at NLSP, I had no idea what to expect. Older law students warned me that I would not receive meaningful, substantive work as a first year legal intern. However, I found my experience at NLSP to be precisely the opposite as I had expected. Under the supervision of experienced attorneys, I managed my own caseload, communicated and met frequently with clients, and wrote memoranda of law on behalf of indigent clients in D.C. In addition, I strengthened my litigation skills by writing direct and cross examination questions, editing pre-trial documents, and analyzing depositions to strengthen our client’s case. I also improved my writing skills by drafting a variety of motions, including motions to modify child support, motions to modify child custody, and motions in limine.

One of the most rewarding assignments I received was working on a complex and long-standing third party custody dispute in the Domestic Relations Branch of the D.C. Superior Court. The case was difficult in many ways. First, the factual history of the case was unusually complex and the parties had been fighting over custody of the minor child for over 10 years. Secondly, as a third party custody case, the legal framework under which the case was decided was much less certain than the traditional best-interests framework applied in custody matters between biological parents. Finally, the case was hotly contested and the opposing party presented a vigorous opposition to our client’s position. The trial was set for 7 days, involved 4 parties, and initially had approximately 30 witnesses, including 3 experts set to testify.

(Continued)
Emily Ittner – 2L

As part of my assignment, I helped prep our client, the minor child's biological father, to testify at trial. Given our client’s mental illness, prior substance abuse issues, and memory loss, it was imperative that he be adequately prepared to give testimony on direct and cross-examination. He had also previously been incarcerated and therefore, only recently developed a close relationship with his son. Despite these obstacles, our client had been making tremendous strides. He was in therapy, was compliant with his medications, and was free of all substances. The stakes in the case were extremely high. If we won, our client could preserve his relationship with his son. If we lost, our client could lose all ability to remain a meaningful part of his son’s life.

Our client was extremely disillusioned with the court system in general. He was very hesitant to testify, and there were major gaps in his testimony. Although our client’s forgetfulness was attributable to his past substance abuse and memory loss, there was a huge risk he would not be seen as credible and that his past demons would be used to prove his lack of parental fitness. Therefore, to prepare for trial, I used the events our client did remember to spur him to remember the others crucial to building the timeline of our case.

I also carefully analyzed prior transcripts for impeachment material. I summarized these findings into usable pieces of information. My supervising attorney used this information to craft a thorough cross-examination that ultimately destroyed the opposing party’s credibility. His cross-examination was so effective that it featured prominently in the Judge’s twenty-seven page findings of fact and conclusions of law.

Helping our client win his case was by far the highlight of my summer. Our client was thrilled to have the long-standing dispute resolved once and for all and to be able to finally focus all of his energy on his young son. Furthermore, it was exciting for me to play a small role in helping our client remain a part of his son’s life.

Without the legal help of Neighborhood Legal Services, our client would not have stood a chance in court. Not only was the opposing party exponentially more legally savvy, but his affluent background enabled him to hire the best possible lawyers to present his case. Therefore, winning the case was not only a victory for our client, but for low-income, underserved clients everywhere. The case was also a testament to the hard work of the tenacious and resourceful attorneys at NLSP, who overcame tremendous odds to win the case.

I will cherish my summer at NLSP for years to come. I am extremely grateful to be the recipient of a SPIL Fellowship, which made this wonderful experience possible!
This past summer I worked at the Bronx District Attorney’s Office as a summer intern in the Sex Crimes Unit. Throughout the summer I worked closely with the attorneys interviewing victims, researching pertinent case law and observing hearings and a variety of trials. I was able to watch several rape trials and observed two homicide trials that were being prosecuted by attorneys from other divisions within the District Attorney’s Office.

As an intern I shadowed assistant district attorneys who allowed me to participate in multiple interviews of sex crime victims. Listening to the victim’s story and trying to gather all the crucial information in order to build a case was our main focus during the interviews. Often the attorney and I would discuss the story with supervisors in order to determine the appropriate course of action. Several times the decision was made to move forward with the case, present it to the Grand Jury and try and get an indictment. Other times when there was inadequate evidence, the victim was referred to the special victims services unit where counseling and other types of services were offered. Participating in witness interviews helped me understand and practice the nuances of effective interviewing.

Not only did I learn the value of these interview skills during factual investigations, but I also learned how to translate those skills into effective witness preparation techniques. Overall I found a deep personal satisfaction in being part of a team that gives a voice to victims in often frightening and sometimes dangerous situations. Additionally, I admired the tenacity and thoroughness of the prosecutors I worked with both in and out of the courtroom and hope that I can emulate these qualities as a future attorney.
My 2013 summer externship at the U.S. Attorney’s Office Office in DC allowed me to achieve and explore new goals I’ve been defining since the start of law school. I gained important legal experience through my placement in the Sex Offense & Domestic Violence unit. I gained courtroom experience, understood criminal law complexities and the Government’s role as a prosecutor, and developed a true understanding of the justice system’s impact on both victims and criminals.

First, in regard to courtroom experience, I assisted the attorneys in multiple ways such as writing motions and sitting with them at trial to take notes and make observations. Misdemeanor crime attorneys were in Superior court every day, and I was able to lend them a hand during fast paced judicial outcomes. Additionally, I was able to work on federal plea hearings and assist attorneys with research for District court. Second, my understanding of criminal law expanded while working at the U.S Attorney’s Office. Seeing how the government fully prosecutes defendants and works with victims in DC is a critical component of our system and I enjoyed working with victims first hand in preparation for trial. Third, I know understand our justice system much better after working with victims and individuals who partake in our system. Witness interviews and arraignments both show the need for prosecutorial discretion and what it takes to ensure a fair outcome.

Overall, this internship was challenging and insightful. It helped me achieve my legal goals while serving the people of DC and fighting for justice in the Sex Offense and Domestic Violence department.
This summer I worked as an extern at the Department of Justice, Office of the Pardon Attorney. It was both a rewarding and enlightening experience. I assisted the Pardon Attorney in case processing tasks. Efforts included corresponding with petitioners, evaluating clemency cases, and the preparing reports to the Office of the President on selected cases. I assisted in approximately two hundred cases over the course of the summer term.

The Office of the Pardon Attorney acts as a liaison with applicants who are often from under represented groups in society. The mission of the Office is to advise the President on the use of his power to grant clemency for offenses against the United States pursuant to Article II, § 2 of the Constitution. The Office of the Pardon Attorney processes petitions for all forms of clemency, including pardon, commutation of sentence, and remission of fine, by conducting the required investigation on each petition and preparing a report and recommendation to the President for the signature of the Deputy Attorney General, as well as by preparing documents such as warrants of clemency and notices of denial, necessary to implement the President’s decisions.
This summer, I worked as a legal intern at the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) in Alexandria, Virginia. The mission of ICMEC is to help bring justice to children victims of crime by taking measures to find missing children and to prevent crimes committed against them. I worked specifically in the area of child sex trafficking. The nature of the work I did while at ICMEC was researching international laws that each country had implemented to criminalize and prevent child sex trafficking. In most cases, countries world-wide lack laws that are essential to preventing crimes against children. Upon making the determination which countries needed to improve their legislation, I helped to create model legislation that would be provided to countries to demonstrate the elements that need to be added to their legislation to make it more protective of children and their rights.

In addition to the research and writing aspect of the work I did at ICMEC this summer, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend several events related to crimes against children. ICMEC, in partnership with Thomson Reuters, held a conference in D.C. that addressed the issues that growing technology presents to the prevention of crimes involving children. My fellow interns and I were also provided with the chance to visit the ICE Department’s Cyber Crime Center to see the work that is being done there to crack down on offenders of crimes against children. We were also able to attend seminars at the Department of Justice, the State Department, and the Protection Project from the School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University on the topics of human trafficking and crimes against children. Each of these various events shed light on the growing need to protect children and the importance of the work being done to prevent these kinds of crimes from being committed against children.
With the generous support of a SPIL stipend, I interned during the summer 2013 with the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC). ICMEC works in various fields “establishing global resources, promoting the creation of operational centers, building an international network, providing training, advocating and proposing changes to legislation, leading global financial coalitions, and conducting international expert conferences.” As an intern, I supported ICMEC’s goals through researching various substantive areas of law and creating model legislation for the organization.

I worked on ICMEC’s Child Grooming Model Legislation project. (Online Child Grooming is a process by which an adult creates a relationship with a child online in order to prepare him or her for future sexual exploitation. The process normalizes children to sexual activity and often includes showing child pornography and sexualizing online chats.) In this position, I researched various countries’ Penal Codes to access their anti-online child grooming laws. After conducting this research, I wrote up country reports, summarizing the progress of each individual country’s anti-grooming laws. ICMEC will publish these reports in their model legislation. In addition to this research, I helped create and edit Model Legislation combating Child Grooming.

In addition to honing my research and writing skills and contributing to children’s rights, I enjoyed meeting and working with students from other law schools, visiting other children’s rights organizations, and attending United States Department lectures. It was a great experience and I recommend that future intern-seekers look into ICMEC.
While working with the San Francisco Public Defenders over the summer of 2013, I was assigned to assist a Deputy Public Defender with all aspects of case preparation. I had the opportunity to represent clients in open court as a California Student Attorney on motions to reduce bond. I also prepared to conduct a preliminary hearing on a second-degree burglary case.

Additionally, I served as second chair on an attempted robbery trial, wrote motions, interviewed witnesses, and conducted intake interviews of new clients. The long hours and intensely emotional work strengthened my resolve to pursue a career in public defense to fight injustices one case and one client at a time.
During my 2L summer I worked as a legal intern in the Legal Affairs office of the New York City Department of Finance. In this role I conducted legal research and wrote memoranda of law in preparation for conciliation meetings with taxpayers and researched and reported on the potential impact of current tax policy proposals.

This office plays an important role in the city government by ensuring that the appropriate parties are paying proper taxes and providing conciliation meetings with taxpayers to avoid the costly and timely appeals process in the Tax Appeals Tribunal. The office must also respond to continually evolving business practices, uses of property, and the implementation of excise taxes to make sure that the law is accurately reflecting the tax policy that the Mayor’s office has put forward.

As a student interested in pursuing a career in tax policy this internship provided me with relevant experience in the field, an experience that I would not have had without the assistance of the SPIL stipend.
This past summer I interned at Catholic Charities Archdiocesan Legal Network in downtown DC. The mission of the Legal Network is to provide pro bono legal services and law-related education to indigent and low-income residents of Washington, DC and surrounding counties.

The Legal Network enlists the support of volunteer attorneys and area law firms to provide legal services to individuals and families in matters basic to survival and independent living. The Legal Network accepts matters involving bankruptcy, consumer issues, family law, employment disputes, government entitlements, landlord/tenant conflicts, and wills and probate matters. Other meritorious non-fee generating civil law cases are also considered. A modified version of the Federal Poverty Guidelines is used to determine client eligibility for pro bono legal services. The Legal Network also provides civil law education seminars for the community on various topics.

Working under the supervision of the Legal Network’s Director, Jim Bishop, I conducted client intake, researched and drafted legal memoranda, wrote and distributed case summaries to our volunteer attorneys, and wrote and edited the annual newsletter. I also helped with Catholic Charities’ weekly meal for the homeless.

My experience at Catholic Charities last summer had a profound personal and professional impact on me. It was sobering to see the enormous unmet demand for affordable legal representation firsthand. While I hope to work in private practice after law school, my internship confirmed my commitment to making pro bono work a regular part of my future legal practice.
This past summer I was a recipient of the SPIL stipend and I was selected to work for the Circuit Court of Anne Arundel County as a part of their Case Management Office. Throughout the summer, I was privileged to work with a valuable team of attorney’s that helped to explain and break down every question that I had regarding my assigned cases. I was given various assignments in this role, including drafting orders and/or motions for civil and family law matters. I was also assigned various issues to research and write memos on for my office. These issues ranged from family issues such as marriage, divorce and custody, to foreclosure matters, and even issues the Courthouse had with respect to court transcript fees. I also was given the opportunity to participate in mediation with multiple and various foreclosure cases.

Each week I was given a stack of files and I was expected by the end of the week to provide a recommendation on what the next step should be to move the case forward through the Court. My recommendation was discussed thoroughly with my supervisor and I was expected then to draft the appropriate document to get the case moving through our office and the Court. Our weekly meetings involved breaking the files into pieces, learning to search the history of the cases, and determining the next steps for each case. I learned in this internship how to read through a file, research particular issues, and recommend or determine what should happen. I was responsible, for example, for drafting multiple status orders, dismissal orders, and orders to reopen a closed case. Through this internship I also had the opportunity to work in the court reporting office, where I learned how to transcribe juvenile and criminal cases.

Near the end of my internship this fall, I started working with the alternative dispute resolution (ADR) coordinator. I helped to set and organize status conferences and mediations for civil and family law matters. When the internship ended, the Circuit Court offered me a part-time paid position based on my work this summer in their ADR office as interim ADR coordinator. I organize and schedule all the civil mediation cases for my office and also plan the foreclosure ADR every three months. It has proved to be a very positive experience as I work closely with the attorney’s, mediators, and the parties in each of the cases. I have built a strong relationship with my office, and I have learned through this role how a case moves through the Court, as well as what is involved with a position inside a Courthouse.

Overall, I would recommend this internship because it offered a range of skills and experiences. I was able to work in a wide variety of roles and had great supervision with all of the cases that I worked on during my time as a SPIL recipient. I am thankful for the experience and for the SPIL stipend that allowed me to have this opportunity.
During the summer after my 1L year I interned at D.C. Superior Court in the Chambers of the Honorable Jeanette J. Clark. Judge Clark’s calendar was Domestic Relations I, which is comprised of family law matters such as divorces, alimony and child support. While I was in chambers I was assigned a variety of different research tasks that produced numerous memos on different subjects related to family law. I researched and wrote memos on the District of Columbia Child Support Guideline, attorney’s fees, the Child and Family Services Agency and sanctions for refusing court orders. Additionally, Judge Clark wanted me to experience as many different calendars and judges as I could. So I also was permitted and encouraged to observe different calendars and hearings around the court house.

This summer I was really able to see how court works. I saw many people represent themselves pro-se and it helped me realize that there is a large need for skilled legal professionals in many different areas of law. I appreciated receiving the SPIL stipend because I feel that interning the summer with a Judge exposed me to law in “real-life,” outside of the classroom and gave me the exposure to people needing legal representation.