

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 157, No. 163

Friday, August 19, 2011

Shedd Aquarium uses law students to help with environmental efforts

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For Liz Georges, volunteering at the Shedd Aquarium was a simple and fun way to distract herself from law school.

By the time she was in her third year at Northwestern University School of Law, Georges figured out a way to combine her love for the aquarium and the law through an independent study course that allowed her research environmental issues in conjunction with the Shedd.

Once she graduated, Georges started working in Jones, Day's environmental group while she continued to volunteer at the Chicago aquarium, where she often found herself elbow deep in raw fish.

Before she left Jones, Day two years later to move to Washington D.C., where she now works for the Washington Project for the Arts, Georges decided she wanted to create something that would benefit young law students and the aquarium that she spent so much time at during law school.

So, in 2002, Georges created the Georges Fellowship for Conservation, an eight-week, summer internship that gives first-year law students the chance to conduct environmental policy research with Shedd. It is provided through a grant from the Georges Foundation, her family's philanthropic foundation.

"I wanted to give a young law student the opportunity I had to fall in love with an organization like the Shedd and to see how being affiliated with an organization like that can change your life," she said. "It really did."

Shortly after the creation of the fellowship, Georges managed to convince her bosses at Jones, Day to jump on board and assign some of the firm's summer associates to spend their time researching environmental issues at the Shedd.

Nearly a decade later, representatives of the Shedd and Jones, Day said they couldn't

be happier that Georges' way to distract herself from law school has turned into a successful internship program that benefits everyone.

Charles T. Wehland, a partner at Jones, Day, has been involved with the program since the beginning.

"We got involved because of Liz Georges. She convinced us it would be a great opportunity and over the years, we've seen that it is," Wehland said. "It's a great experience for our summer associates. It's an experience you can't just duplicate in the office."

Caitlin Harrington couldn't agree more. She was this year's Georges fellow.

"I had the opportunity to do a lot of really neat things at the Shedd," said Harrington, who starts her second year at The John Marshall Law School next week. "I was actually able to get out with the conservation department and go on a river watch. It was such a great experience."

Harrington said while she still has two years of law school to go, she does have an interest in becoming an environmental lawyer. She said a previous stint on Lincoln Park Zoo's fundraising staff helped open her eyes to the environmental field.

During her time with the Shedd, which came to an end last month, Harrington researched and authored a white paper on water conservation and policy to try to figure out the future of Great Lakes and Illinois water laws.

Harrington said having the chance to go out into the field with Shedd's conservation department helped her put her research topic into context.

"As a future attorney, I think it's really important to understand the areas that are involved in your industry," she said, adding that going to work at the Shedd every day made it "very easy to remember what you're working for."

In addition to Harrington, the four summer

associates at Jones, Day — Aaron Eisenberg, Beth Engel, Tracy Branding and Simone Collins — each wrote their own white paper.

Andrea Smalec, director of communications and public relations for the Shedd, said those four law students, two of whom are from Northwestern's law school, spent their summer researching Great Lakes water level management, numeric discharge criteria for nutrients and the legal structures that authorize the diversion of water from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River.

Sarah Sinovic, the Shedd's Great Lakes policy analyst, said having law students intern at the Shedd is extremely beneficial since it does not have any lawyers on staff.

"The biggest benefit of working the Jones, Day associates, as well as having the Georges fellow for eight weeks, is really getting that law-based perception and research into our hands," she said. "A lot of their research is shared internally with staff and we will share it with the greater Great Lakes community."

Sinovic said the Shedd has a library in which all of the interns' white papers are kept in anticipation that, at some point, the public will be able to access the research.

As a Jones, Day partner who has worked closely with its summer associates at the Shedd over the years, Wehland said the research they do has proved to be useful in his practice, which focuses on environmental law and climate change.

"My perspective, selfishly, is that this is great because I get to learn new things," he said, adding that the first place he goes when he needs background on an unfamiliar issue that he is handling is to the library of white papers written by his previous summer associates.

Wehland said the summer associate program at the Shedd has produced "all kinds of benefits we never could have imagined."