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Clinic hits 20th anniversary

John Marshall program aims to help victims of housing discrimination

BY JENN BALLARD
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Christopher T. Vogel now works as an equal opportunity specialist for Housing and Urban Development in Kansas City.

He probably doesn't get that job without his work at the Fair Housing Legal Clinic at The John Marshall Law School.

"There were day-to-day victories with what we were doing," said Vogel, a 2008 John Marshall graduate. "When you're in contact with people on a day-to-day basis, you can really see the difference you are making."

The clinic, which marks its 20th anniversary this year, makes John Marshall the only law school in the country with a clinical program devoted exclusively to training students in fair housing law and enforcement.

Through a U.S. Department of Education grant, the law school established the clinic in 1993. Since 1994, the Fair Housing Legal Clinic at the John Marshall Law School has received its funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Each year, about 55 students take the fair housing law class and earn an additional two to four credit hours based on time spent working in the clinic.

"We are training them in the civil practice and at the same time helping victims of discrimination," said professor Allison K. Bethel, the clinic's director.

Each year, the clinic represents about 100 people, free of charge, who face discrimination in access to housing because of race, color, gender, national origin, religion, disability or familial status. The

clinic also handles cases that involve sexual orientation, Section 8 voucher holders and victims of domestic violence.

"Chicago has had the dubious distinction of being one of the most segregated cities in America," Bethel said.

"That gave us a very fertile ground on which to practice housing discrimination and hopefully improve our standing and diminish the frequency of housing discrimination here."

Since 2006, disability complaints have exceeded race complaints, accounting for about half of all fair housing complaints, Bethel said. The issues include claims for reasonable accommodations to policies and procedures as well as structural modifications.

"We've tried to take cutting-edge cases and help develop the law in this area," she said. "The state is trying to mandate a way to get more people out of (mental) institutions, but they can't mandate it without giving them any place to go."

Professor Michael P. Seng, co-executive director of the Fair Housing Legal Support Center said the program provides students with experience that includes "client intake, case development through discovery, legal writing and in some cases, arguing the case before a commission or in federal or state court."

The clinic's students also acquire valuable skills in law office management that will aid them in other practice areas, he said.

"The preparatory work requires students to use all their analytical skills to determine the best forum in which to pursue the case," he said.

The clinic continues to build on its successes protecting the civil



Allison K. Bethel

rights of its clients and training students in the practice of law, Bethel said.

"As the economy improves and cities begin to rebuild and revitalize, the clinic is uniquely positioned to assist in building more integrated and thriving communities," she said.

A degree for non-lawyers

For La Grange resident Nicholas A. D'Asta, learning the legal lingo helped him not only interact with attorneys, but also improve his business.

The chief financial officer for W.S. Darley & Co. in Itasca — which manufacturers firefighting equipment — D'Asta said he sought a non-lawyer master's degree in law to better identify tax issues.

"And also how to properly research them," he said. "Reading the tax code is not the most interesting thing, but the stories and the experiences of the faculty really brought it to life."

D'Asta was the first person to graduate with a master's in tax law degree in 2008 from The John Marshall Law School, which established the non-lawyer degree program about a decade ago.

"I had previously only had two classes in taxation, and a lot of what I do involves taxes, so I thought it would be nice to go back and fill in the gaps," D'Asta, 60, said.

"It was a chance for me to prove to myself that you can teach an old dog new tricks."

The school offers degree specialties in employee benefits, information technology and privacy law, intellectual property law, real estate law and tax law.



Kathryn Jennings Kennedy

Kathryn Jennings Kennedy, associate dean for advanced studies and research at the school, said the degree programs help non-lawyers "boost their careers by learning the myriad legal issues surrounding a given field."

"A lot of the people who take the courses ... just want to be able to read the law itself and get it," Kennedy said.

"They don't necessarily want to become lawyers. But they're butting their heads up against the law, and they want to better understand it."

The students enrolled in the master's programs take the same specialized courses as lawyers earning a master's in law degree and elevate class discussions by offering a point of view that comes from workplace experience, Kennedy said.

The master's degrees, which are comprised of 24 credit hours, can be completed in two semesters as a full-time student or part time in two to five years.

Three years ago, the school began to offer master's degree programs specializing in employee benefits and intellectual property law online. Some master's degree courses in information technology and privacy law are also online.

"The online classes make them more attractive to prospective master's students, and I know the employee benefits degree is the only one of its kind in the nation," Kennedy said.

"And that's why we put it online, because we want to offer it to everyone."