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Family law clinic provides educational escape from classroom

By Alexandra Schwappach

IRVINE - Third-year law student Mimi Ahn's first official court appearance - a default hearing in a divorce case - was nerve-wracking. But an understanding judge, a script and the support of colleagues and mentors steered her through to the end.

Ahn, a student at the UC Irvine School of Law, said she might not have had the opportunity to present in court so early in her career if it weren't for her participation in a family law clinic through the university and the Legal Aid Society of Orange County.



Alexandra Schwappach / Daily Journal
From left, UC Irvine School of Law students Andrew J. Benard, Mimi Ahn and Elizabeth McCullough-Sanden help at a family law clinic through Orange County's legal aid society.

"It was my first real experience in a courtroom and I am so glad I was able to do that while still in law school," Ahn said. "I don't think I would have been able to do that if it weren't for this program."

The year-old clinic grew from a two-day "Family Law Blitz" the society put on in January 2012. The blitz received such a positive response - including a pro-bono service award from the California Bar - that Bill Tanner, a legal aid society staff attorney, decided to make the clinic a weekly event.

Now the society's clinic is run primarily by UCI law students who come in from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. every Friday during the spring and fall semesters to help people with a variety of family legal concerns such as divorce and dissolutions.

Andrew J. Benard, a third year law student, said the clinic is a "hands on, feet wet" program. In one particularly tough case, Benard handled two divorces for a pair of Persian women in their 60s. A language barrier added an extra challenge to the process, but the experience had a lasting impact.

"I've learned there is no substitute for sitting down and talking to a client to try to understand what it is they need," he said. "One of the hardest parts about being a lawyer is figuring out what is in the best interest of your client."

Currently there are seven UCI students signed up for the family law project at the legal aid society. Between the blitz projects and past semesters, 39 students have volunteered.

Almost all the clinic participants are certified law students, which means they can represent clients in court as long as they are supervised by an attorney. Mary Melech, a contract attorney who oversees the clinic, said roughly one-fourth of the legal aid society's advocates are certified law students. Students from other local law schools, including Whittier Law School and Chapman University Fowler School of Law, also participate in the clinic.



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Legal aid staff attorneys step in to help the students when needed, generally during the review phase. With that efficient of a system, the clinic can serve up to 15 clients a day, Melech said. In 2012, the clinic helped more than 300 people.

"I think we are on track to top that number this year," she said.

Ahn describes the program as a place that has nurtured her affinity for public interest work. Regardless of the direction her career takes, she plans to make pro-bono work a central part of her life as an attorney.

"It's easy to go start working and forget there is a pro bono aspect to law," she said. "I think when you are exposed to [pro-bono work] in law school you get really fond memories of working on public interest projects."

The issues that people bring to the family law clinic can be especially humbling, the students say. As new lawyers, they often struggle to find the fine line between empathy and logic when counseling clients.

"The biggest learning experience for me has been the client interaction," said Elizabeth McCullough-Sanden, a second year law student at UCI. "It's given me the ability to learn when to be empathetic and when to be logical and rational."

In cases where domestic abuse is involved, it is especially difficult to remain objective, Ahn said. She's learned to remain professional and keep the client on course.

"I think that sort of training is something you are definitely not going to get in a classroom," she said.

While the majority of people that come through the doors of the legal aid society are patient and grateful for the legal help, there is the occasional difficult client, the students said. They've each developed their own personal method of managing those customers. For Ahn, it's self-deprecating humor. McCullough-Sanden arms herself with kindness. Benard goes into what he calls "lawyer mode."

For many of the students, participating in the clinic is more of an outlet than it is work. It's a chance to escape the library or the classroom and just meet face-to-face with real people working through real issues.

"Doing this keeps things in perspective and reminds me why I want to be a lawyer," McCullough-Sanden said.

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