



# STUDENTS GET A LESSON IN LEADERSHIP AT THE VETERANS LEGAL INSTITUTE'S SUMMER INTERNSHIP

by ALLISON K. HIGLEY, KATELYN FRIESEN, and CLARE WERNET

Summer is anything but a vacation for students interning at the Veterans Legal Institute (VLI). Every May, a score of students from law schools, colleges, and high schools flood into VLI's headquarters in Santa Ana—bright, motivated young people eager to make a difference in the lives of America's veteran population. This summer, the tally came in at ten law students, two undergraduates, and one high-schooler from eight different schools.

"There is a lot of life in the office right now," Andrew Rothenberger, a staff attorney and UC Irvine Law Public Interest Fellow, quipped in July during the peak of the internship program. "But a noisy office is a welcome inconvenience for the opportunity to familiarize students with the life-changing work that occurs at VLI, teaching the plethora of practice areas we handle every day."

Allison Higley, an Equal Justice Works AmeriCorps Fellow, concurred: "I love having the summer interns around, a reminder that it was not that long ago when I was in

their shoes." Ms. Higley summured with the California National Guard's JAG Corps while a student at Whittier Law School, an experience that changed the trajectory of her life. "The chance to teach civilians like myself about the challenges our service members and veterans face is critical, a responsibility I take seriously. Vets sacrifice so much for us; assisting them with their legal needs is the least we civilians can do."

Students came from all over the country to participate in a competitive ten-week program running from mid-May to late July. Blake Gunn, an Oklahoma native currently a junior at Pomona College, drove one hour each morning from Claremont to Santa Ana. "I felt like a real-life adult making that commute every day," Gunn said, a mop of long hair pulled back in a man bun. Smiling, he added, "It was a hard—but good—reality check."

Collectively, the thirteen VLI summer interns assisted more than 250 veterans during their ten-week tenure. Writing demand letters, drafting motions, and researching

legal memoranda under the watching eyes of the staff attorneys, it was not unusual for their work to include a meaningful social component. Sean Karol, a 2L at the UC Irvine School of Law, assisted an African American Navy veteran in applying for a discharge upgrade. "Segregation in the Armed Forces had only just ended when our client served," Karol explained. "The Navy culture during that time was hostile and unwelcoming to African American service members, and our client was severely mistreated. VLI is working to help him upgrade his discharge, so he can obtain access to the benefits he deserves."

Dwight Stirling, VLI's CEO and Co-Founder, places a heavy emphasis on leadership development as he manages the program. "In addition to their legal work, every intern is assigned a leadership role," Stirling said. "The roles rotate weekly, so one week an intern is the squad leader, the next week she's the social events manager, and the week after that she's in charge of KP." His philosophy is that leadership is grounded

in interdependence, the concept that if one person fails to do their job, the group suffers, a belief informed by his fifteen-year military career with the National Guard.

Stirling expected the interns to demonstrate personal accountability, first-rate client interaction, and even proper phone etiquette, skills the internship program tested daily. The ability to communicate clearly and effectively was also stressed. The interns and office staff met weekly to discuss important topics, including professional responsibility issues and current events. Each student was required to lead a group discussion on a topic of legal or social significance, ranging from the status of women in combat roles to the ethical dilemmas inherent in artificial intelligence.

"Having to articulate an opinion or a viewpoint on the spot during discussions is good training for a legal career," says Darius Dehghan, a 2L at UC Berkeley School of Law. "The discussions train us to be coherent even when there is not a lot of time to reflect."

Not only does the program foster critical thinking and leadership, it also allowed the civilians among the group to gain insight into the military lifestyle. (Three of the interns were veterans themselves.) This exposure ultimately helped the civilian students to better understand the unique legal issues

veterans face. "My summer at VLI has been an eye-opening experience," said Sarah Lee, a 2L at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. "One of the most valuable things I have learned here is that our veterans are hardworking, committed individuals who do not want a handout. They seek our assistance while not wanting to 'burden' us. Their concern about putting us out is heartwarming, if ultimately misplaced."

The learning opportunities for the interns extended far beyond VLI's office. Students also immersed themselves in the Orange County legal community with intern-organized field trips to local nonprofits, firms, courts, and Orange County Bar Association events. "One of our goals is to build future leaders in both the legal field and in our communities," Higley observed. "We want to help shape attorneys who know how to work with others, make ethical decisions, and give back to their communities."

Many students were eager to continue their work with veterans after the summer ended. Karol, for instance, the UCI Law 2L, decided to continue interning for VLI in the fall semester. He was initially introduced to the VLI's work by Antoinette Balta, VLI's President and Co-Founder, who runs a veterans legal clinic at UCI. "The most satisfy-

ing aspect of interning at VLI is being able to work directly with clients in desperate need of assistance—and telling them they don't have to pay a cent for our services," Karol said. "As a law student, the breadth of legal work I get to do here is something I'd be hard-pressed to find somewhere else."

Stirling has high hopes for the future of the VLI summer internship program. "The VLI interns showcase a level of public service and engagement that is exciting to see in the next generation of lawyers. The program's emphasis on character-building and community relationships could, in many respects, serve as a model for other internship programs across the county."



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