

University of Miami School of Law 2008 HOPE Fellows

"A Decade of Making a Difference Through Legal Advocacy and Service"



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Shari Astalos (2L)

Placement: Manhattan Legal Services, (Harlem, NY)

Shari has always valued being involved in civil service. Volunteering and pursuing her education around the globe, in countries such as France, Monaco, Israel, and Spain, has led to a greater understanding of the world. However, instead of globetrotting during the summer of 2008, Shari decided to stay a little closer to home, with an internship at the Legal Services Offices in New York. Realizing her love and knack for languages, the supervising attorneys asked her to work towards breaking down language barriers that hinder the delivery of legal services. To accomplish this seemingly daunting task, Shari worked to coordinate an outreach program within different multicultural communities to recruit much needed translators and facilitate client-attorney relationships. In addition, Shari worked on various legal issues in such practice areas as Immigration, Housing, and Disability Law.

“While at UM Law, I aim to build upon my community service background and am excited to apply my new legal skills to public interest advocacy projects. Ultimately, I hope to work on a project that ensures liberty and rights for women who have been enslaved to a lifestyle that they did not choose for themselves.”

Christopher Brochyus (3L)

Placement: Eleventh Judicial Circuit Public Defender’s Office, (Miami, FL)

The work that Christopher Brochyus performed while volunteering full-time with the Public Defender’s Office prompted his interest in helping the attorneys learn how to better serve their clients. By communicating options and resources to the people they serve, particularly regarding rights restoration, public defenders can enable former clients to re-enter society with less difficulty. Particularly in his representation of low-income clients, Christopher realized the grave difficulties associated with defending individuals in the judicial system. However, determined to treat his clients with the same zealous advocacy that inspired him to work at the PD’s office, he believes these issues are surmountable. It is for this reason that he also became involved with the Rights Restoration Project. Christopher’s vast work experience includes increasing the size of the American Red Cross’ youth staff, which went on to become the largest in the country, and helping to rebuild the city of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.



“I think it is a great opportunity for law students to volunteer their time with an organization devoted to civil rights. The Florida Constitution takes away convicted felons’ civil rights and, in most cases, the general public is unaware that they can be restored.”



Ashley Cetnar (2L)

Placement: Miami Guardian ad Litem (GAL), (Miami, FL)

Working at GAL was an important step for Ashley in her legal career, as the organization embodies her dreams for work after law school. With drive and passion, Ashley was able to supplement the services of GAL to increase the amount of individual attention and involvement of children in their own legal process. This ensured a more positive experience for the children and a more favorable perception of the judicial system. The opportunity to work at GAL was incredibly valuable in furthering Ashley's commitment to the issues that children face in the legal system. As a Fellow, she will continue to promote opportunities for students, lawyers, and community members to become involved in the representation of youth in dependency matters.



"I have seen the problems that can arise when individuals feel disenfranchised in the systems created to help them, and I wish to use my law degree to improve the legal system for children."



Marya Farah (2L)

Placement: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Lebanon (UNHCR)

Marya has spent much of her time working in the Middle East, involved in programs designed to better the lives of the citizens. As a senior project coordinator for Right to Play in the United Arab Emirates, Marya assisted in implementing a pilot project in Dubai public schools and monitoring its progress through school visits, assessments, and collaborations with teachers. She also worked with the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group, the American Near East Refugee Aid in Jerusalem, and with the UN's Relief and Works Agency in Lebanon. In more than five decades, the UNHCR has helped an estimated 50 million people restart their lives, with more than 32.9 million persons currently seeking assistance in 110 countries. During the summer of 2008, Marya's primary duty was to safeguard the well-being of refugees, in light of the increasing number of individuals that have been displaced within the last few years.

"My experiences have provided me with a broad base of knowledge on issues confronted by refugees, as well as the development and aid projects necessary to support such a population."




Daniela Gordon (2L)

Placement: FANM (Fanm Ayisyen Nan Miyami) Haitian Women of Miami, Inc., (Miami, FL)

During Daniela's first year as a law student, she was actively involved in numerous community outreach projects. In addition to serving as the project leader for Light the Night, an annual event to raise awareness and funds for leukemia, lymphoma and myeloma, Daniela was also involved in serving the homeless at Camillus House, building with Habitat for Humanity and walking for breast cancer. During the summer of 2008, Daniela worked with FANM, whose mission is to aid Haitian refugee women and their families in their adjustment to South Florida and the United States. Daniela's efforts, legal research and advocacy have allowed her to empower women socially, economically, and politically, as well as provide them with much-needed health and immigration services.

"Being a great lawyer has become more about 'doing well' than 'doing good.' Pro bono services are vital to ensuring that basic needs in society are met."

Marissa Gray (2L)

Placement: Eleventh Judicial Circuit Public Defender's Office, (Miami, FL)

Working in collaboration with Carlos Martinez, Miami Dade County's Public Defender-Elect, Marissa worked on the juvenile justice legal reform initiatives through the Public Defender's Charting a Path to Redemption (CPR) Project. In addition, she helped to fine tune legislation for the 2009-2012 Blueprint Commission Initiatives, specifically regarding the confidentiality of juvenile records, the removal of barriers to employment and issues regarding attorney consultation privileges. The legal experience she gained working with advocacy programs such as the Redemption Project and Wrongful Convictions helped her tremendously in her fellowship. Marissa's work on specific issues, as they relate to juveniles, helped to promote needed change in a system that indiscriminately shackles juveniles in courts statewide and raise awareness for these platforms in Congress.



"Every student should reach out of their comfort zone and give back to the community. I look forward to contributing to juvenile justice reform initiatives and hope to raise a greater awareness of the problems juveniles continue to face in Florida."



Shannon A. Greco (2L)

Placement: United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), (London, UK) and Due Process of Law Foundation (D.C.)

During her first year at UM Law, Shannon was highly involved with several HOPE projects, including Books and Buddies, VITA, Workers' Misclassification, and Foster Teen Outreach. She also participated in an Alternative Spring Break trip to Guatemala, where she helped organize a legal clinic to address issues including legal inscriptions of children, women's and worker's rights, and the abuse of the elderly. Having traveled extensively throughout developing countries, Shannon expresses a heightened awareness of the obstacles that women face. As a HOPE Fellow with UNIFEM, she dedicated her time to help ensure that women can seek and obtain legal support when it is required. As a legal intern with DPLF, Shannon worked on strategic litigation initiatives to promote the reformation and modernization of Latin America's national justice systems to ensure that the rule of law and respect for human rights are the hallmarks of justice systems throughout the Americas.



"Once a single individual realizes her rights, the knowledge can spread and contribute to the abolition of human rights abuses throughout a village, town, city, country, continent, and hopefully, the elimination of all abuse will occur throughout the world."



Thomas Hart (2L)

Placement: American Civil Liberties Union LGBT Advocacy Project, (Miami, FL)

Thomas Hart worked with the ACLU's LGBT Advocacy Project in the courtroom and in the community on a broad range of issues confronting gay Floridians, including: adoption, marriage, employer-provided domestic partner health coverage and other benefits. One of the two primary trials he assisted with dealt with the formation of a Gay-Straight Alliance at a local high school. His second case, which was presented to the Florida Supreme Court in August, deals with some of the State's discriminatory practices towards gay and lesbian parents. Thomas' efforts also include fighting against the anti-gay marriage measure that will be on the November ballot and working ardently on behalf of the gay community in the hopes of combating the many rights violations running rampant today.

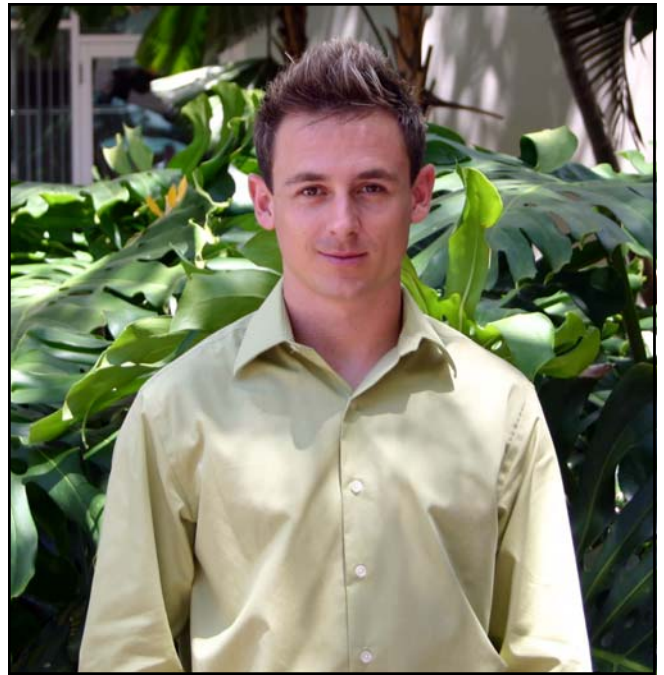
"Especially in the law school setting, where so much focus is placed on grades and landing a high-paying job upon graduation, encouraging students to focus on helping others is a very important counterbalance. More than ever, the work of groups like the ACLU to protect the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered Americans is urgent."



Henry Link (2L)

Placement: United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), (Arusha, Tanzania)

Henry's diverse background prepared him well to spend the summer of 2008 working with the United Nations in Arusha, Tanzania. He was able to further expand his understanding of some of the major global problems confronting the world and how, in particular, the UN's ICTR attempts to find solutions to those issues. As an ambassador of good will, Henry helped with legal research and writing, interviewing victims and witnesses, visiting refugee camps and conducting special projects. During his free time, Henry worked with Students for International Change, a non-profit organization he co-founded during a previous stay in Arusha. During that time, he worked to educate the public about health as well as HIV/AIDS and patient care, primarily in rural villages. Coupled with his work in banking, much of which focused on small loans to support struggling entrepreneurs, Henry has proven his dedication to others in serving the groups who are most in need of assistance.



"I was searching for a career that would embrace my passion for business and economics, community service, advocacy, and culture, and would feed my desire to truly make a difference. Through my experience, I have found a sense of fulfillment and empowerment that motivates me to implement change on a greater scale."

Tania Sibonney (2L)

Placement: Lawyers for Children America (LFCA), (Miami, FL)

Tania Sibonney grew up with the belief that time is all that we have in this world. This simple notion has inspired her to dedicate much of her time to her law school education and service work at Lawyers for Children America (LFCA). LFCA is a non-profit organization that provides pro bono legal representation to children who are victims of abuse, abandonment, and neglect. In addition, lawyers collaborate to effect systemic change in order to improve the lives of children. Tania worked at the agency in all of these capacities, striving to realize the goals of the agency and make a positive contribution to the children that LFCA continuously tries to help. Working with supervising attorneys to build LFCA and extend its benefits to reach even more children who are in need, Tania is passionate about working with children and utilizing the skills she has acquired to educate others and assist them in any way possible.



"Children hold the key to our future, and to see such innocence be deprived of life's necessities is an injustice in today's world."




David Spacht (2L)

Placement: Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center (FIAC),
(Miami, FL)

During David's first year at UM Law, he became heavily involved with FIAC's Workers' Misclassification Project. As a HOPE Fellow, David had the opportunity to work closely with FIAC through "We Count Homestead," where he focused his efforts on day laborer cases, along with other cases developed through the Community Steward program and other member groups in areas from Homestead to Little Havana. Through conducting house calls and interviews as well as researching and writing demand letters, David contributed immensely to the Workers' Misclassification Project and helped to identify employees who suffer wage theft and develop policy proposals in order to better protect these workers. David's work will continue this fall as he dedicates himself to addressing policy and legislation to the mistreatment of workers.

"FIAC's Workers' Misclassification Project is the first public interest initiative that I have been a part of during law school, and it has really opened my eyes to the needs of the Miami community."

Khari Taustin (2L)

Placement: Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center (FIAC),
(Miami, FL)

Before classes even began, Khari volunteered in HOPE's Day of Service during orientation week. Throughout her first year, she was involved in VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance), providing free tax assistance to low-income individuals, and the Workers' Misclassification Project, identifying workers who are both misclassified and victims of "wage theft." As a HOPE Fellow, Khari worked at FIAC, a not-for-profit legal assistance organization dedicated to protecting and promoting the basic human rights of immigrants of all nationalities at the local, state and national levels. In addition to representing individual clients, FIAC has a powerful impact on immigration policies and procedures. Khari's work will continue this fall as she leads continuing efforts to address wage theft issues in South Florida.



"I recognize that the law is a dynamic field and that it can also be daunting, complex and intimidating to someone who does know its particulars."





Evian L. White (2L)

Placement: Legal Services of Greater Miami, Inc. (LSGMI), (Miami, FL)

As a first year law student, Evian became actively involved in several initiatives sponsored by the HOPE Public Interest Resource Center, including an alumni and faculty speakers' series, Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA), Alternative Spring Break, and Books and Buddies. Furthering her interest in international affairs, Evian has traveled to Spain and Guatemala, working to bring critical assistance to those in need, while learning about the issues these diverse populations face. As a HOPE Fellow, Evian worked with LSGMI to mitigate the widespread problems brought about by mortgage foreclosure scams and predatory lending. Her linguistic talents in Spanish and Portuguese, in conjunction with her passion to make a difference, allowed her to communicate and learn from the population she aimed to serve, which made her a great asset to LSGMI. Evian will continue her leadership as a Senior HOPE Fellow in the 2008-2009 academic year.

"My passion for public interest spans a whole spectrum of opportunities - the hardest part is narrowing down the list of issues on which to focus."

Erica Whittler (2L)

Placement: Dade County Legal Aid Society, Domestic Violence Division, (Miami, FL)

The reduction of violence against women on college and high school campuses, in both domestic and professional settings, and in the general community wherever necessary is Erica's mission. Inspired to speak out against violence against women during her undergraduate years, Erica is dedicated to the cause of advocating for victims of domestic and sexual violence, and has developed her extensive volunteer training and work experience with organizations geared toward helping and healing these victims. As a HOPE Fellow, Erica worked at the Dade County Legal Aid Society in victim intake, legal research, and assisted victims with post shelter setup and finding financial resources.



"I am extremely committed to assisting abused, battered, and violated women in any way that I can, including helping them to find a legal remedy that suits their needs and keeps them and their children safe."





William Yu (3L)

Placement: International Bridges to Justice (IBJ), (China)

As a Chinese-American law student, William Yu has a unique personal and professional perspective as to how the Chinese legal system can be improved. Through IBJ, he assisted with public defender training, carrying out public rights campaigns, and drafting program reports and evaluations. In light of China's massive socio-economic expansion, the legal system is attempting to modernize in the wake of this flux. By heightening the competency of public defenders, through classes and seminars, these individuals will be better able to protect the interests of their clients. "Defendants in the Chinese legal system already have codes written to protect them. The problem is that no one knows what they are or how to enforce these regulations," William stated. Armed with a strong background in management and service, having worked with organizations such as AmeriCorps, William was eager to have this opportunity to advocate for change in China's legal system.

"Many critics are quick to point out the flaws in China's legal system, but few can actually follow up their criticism with alternative solutions for constructive results... huge gaps still exist between ideal [procedure] and the reality of implementation."

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever does."

-Margaret Mead