

Law in Action





Students Address the Pressing Challenges of our Time

BY SARAH KELLOGG

GW Law students are answering the call. From assisting immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border to volunteering their legal services to legal aid foundations, clinics, government departments, and projects advocating on behalf of children, international refugees, human rights, civil rights, and more, GW Law students are turning sentiment into action.

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES FRYER

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– Jason Zubata

The experience is both aspirational and inspirational, benefiting both law students and the people they serve. “It gets students out of the classroom and into the real world,” says Alan Morrison, Lerner Family Associate Dean for Public Interest and Public Service. “They get to meet people directly affected by the law, and that’s very important to see the law in action.”

In the process, they are forever altered by the people they serve, the real-world lessons they learn, and the knowledge that giving deeply of yourself is a risk worth taking.

Touching Lives at the Border

WHEN GW LAW STUDENTS JASON ZUBATA AND Elizabeth Baran went to Laredo, Texas in March 2022 for the annual Alternative Spring Break trip, their plan was to learn something about the immigrant community and assist those directly affected by current U.S. immigration policies.

Not only did they leave their mark in Laredo, but they also established meaningful connections with members of the immigrant and legal communities as well as with their classmates, as they began their first foray into the legal field.

“I knew I wanted to help the immigrant community, not only in D.C. but around the country, and what better place to make a meaningful impact than at the border,” says Zubata, president of the GW Immigration Law Association (ILA). “Connecting with these immigrants was life changing. It especially changed my perspective on the immigration system. You realize what attorneys are doing there makes a significant difference for those trying to find relief in the United States.”

The ILA organizes an annual service-learning trip to the U.S.-Mexico border. In past years, students traveled to Arizona and El Paso, Texas. Twelve students joined the 2022 trip, which was largely subsidized by grants provided by the GW Student Bar Association and Dean Morrison.

Zubata and Baran’s experience included legal work with

immigrant clients and visits to the border and local shelters serving immigrants. Notably, participants volunteered with Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld LLP, conducting screening interviews with asylum-seekers pursuing waivers to enter the United States while they await their immigration court hearings. Unless asylum-seekers demonstrate a credible fear of persecution upon returning to Mexico or otherwise qualify as a member of a protected group, they must wait for their hearings in Mexico.

Every evening, students would gather for debriefing sessions to discuss what happened that day, what they learned, and how to cope with what they had heard during interviews with individuals— asylum-seekers who had risked their lives to reach the United States to obtain humanitarian protection.

“I think the trip was good exposure for new and experienced law students to the practice of immigration law. The work is extremely rewarding, but it can also be quite difficult when you become so invested in the person’s entire life story and everything that drove them to flee to the United States,” says Baran, 26, who grew up in New Jersey. “But it’s frustrating that even the most deserving people will not always qualify for relief.”

The students also visited Casa De Misericordia, a domestic violence shelter that offers holistic and consistent long-term support for survivors and their children. During their visit, the students provided general legal information in a “Know Your Rights” training, while also learning about the impact these groups have on the individuals they seek to protect.

For Zubata, whose parents are from Argentina, his trip confirmed his passion for public interest work. He will join the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Immigration Litigation this fall as an attorney general’s honors recipient.

“In law school, this is one of the few breaks you get as a third year, but this trip was worth every moment,” says Zubata, who was raised in Miami. “Even though I worked every day on the trip, it was the most impactful week I’ve had in all of my law school career.”



TOP LEFT: GW Law students Elizabeth Baran and Jason Zubata on their spring break volunteer trip at the U.S.-Mexico border.

GW Law students assisted immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border in March as part of the law school's Alternative Spring Break.





Kyle Coffino

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– Kyle Coffino

Making the Personal Professional

KYLE COFFINO IS ON A MISSION. HE’S GOING TO BE A lawyer, of course, but he’s also unwavering in his commitment to increasing access to justice for those who are underrepresented and underprivileged. For Coffino, it’s personal.

“The reason I decided to go to law school was because I was in North Carolina when they passed House Bill 2, the legislation that would basically deny access to facilities based on biological sex,” he says. “I saw the protests and the pushback. I saw the legal battles, and I decided I wanted to have direct impact on things through the law.”

It’s where he felt he could make a difference—one that might influence the very issues he was dealing with at the time. “I’m transgender,” the 26-year-old GW Law student explains. “I’ve been out since I was 18, and I’m very privileged in that regard. I think when you are a part of a community that is so often left behind or ignored, it’s inspiring to be in a position to help people.”

A look at his CV confirms his passion for civil justice and public interest. His 1L summer, he interned with the National Center on Protection Orders and Full Faith & Credit, a division of the Battered Women’s Justice Project. During his second year, he volunteered with the Family Law Pro Bono Project. In the summer following 2L, he volunteered with the Service Assistance Project and the Legal Aid Society of D.C. During his third year, he worked at GW Law’s Family Justice Litigation Clinic and returned to the Legal Aid Society of D.C. to intern a second time.

“Coming from and being part of a minority community, and understanding my own community’s lack of access to resources, I realize I’m in an especially privileged place being able to go to law

school and take internships that are unpaid while completing my degree,” says Coffino, who graduates in May 2023. “I feel like I would be doing a disservice if I didn’t give back in some sense.”

In the summer of 2022, he looks to broaden his public interest work, expanding his horizons beyond domestic violence at the trial level to the appellate level. He is working with the Domestic Violence Legal Empowerment and Appeals Project, which tackles cases involving domestic violence and its intersection with other areas of law such as custody, free speech, and gun rights that come before appellate courts.

“I want to contribute in a way I find meaningful,” he says. “There’s no better way than committed service, service you believe in, and not doing it for the sake of doing it. Sometimes it’s a credential on a CV; I get it, but I don’t like it. I want to be fulfilled by my work and by helping others.”

In his 3L fall semester, he also started a Master’s in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies through the joint degree program offered by GW. He says the joint degree allows him to supplement his legal education with a foundation of scholarship on gender-related privilege, power, and oppression.

“I did so much finding myself and figuring out who I wanted to be as a person eight or 10 years ago,” says Coffino, who grew up in North Carolina. “By the time I hit law school, I knew who I was and I knew what I wanted. I’ve followed that path ever since.”

Protecting the Public Health

WHEN EMMANUELLA SAFORO WAS LOOKING FOR an externship, she wanted an experiential learning opportunity where she could hone her skills and dive into legal life. She sought

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something with purpose, encompassing one of her great passions—ensuring the community’s public health.

“I knew that I wanted to participate in our government and the public health mission of protecting and preserving the health and safety of Americans,” says Saforo, who will be a 3L in the fall. “I was interested in an externship opportunity where I could help people and address complex public health issues.”

She got that, and more. As a student extern in the Field Placement Program, she found a job that would fit her goals and test her assumptions. The job? A highly sought-after externship with the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Reform, Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis.

As part of the externship, she drafted question lines for Select Subcommittee members and recommended witnesses for hearings, wrote report summaries, and conducted research on COVID-19-related advancements.

“With the coronavirus crisis still very much a reality and lives continuing to be at risk, the importance of Emmanuella’s work as a student extern cannot be overstated,” says Keri A. McCoy, assistant dean for field placement.

“My first option was to work for the government,” says Saforo, who grew up in New York. “I was excited about working to address important issues, and COVID-19 has been one of the most complex and pressing problems of our time.”

The Select Subcommittee was charged with examining preparedness for and response to COVID-19, including the planning for and implementation of testing, containment, mitigation, and surveillance activities. The Select Subcommittee also examines the economic impact of COVID-19 on individuals, communities, small businesses, health care providers, states, and

local government entities. “It was the perfect externship for me,” she says.

Saforo was happy to prepare documents for hearings, draft question lines, and hone her research and writing skills. She also was tapped to do extensive review and analysis of White House reports and to attend high-level meetings. The subject matter was compelling, she says, which made the experience even more rewarding for her.

“As a member of the public health team, I believe I played an important role in the Select Subcommittee’s mission,” Saforo says. “It didn’t feel like a job, it felt more like fulfilling a purpose.”

She was also able to work under the leadership of a famed civil rights pioneer, U.S. Rep. James E. Clyburn, D-S.C., the chairman of the Select Subcommittee. “Chairman Clyburn is very passionate about serving this country,” she says. “His faithful government service, and the values that my parents have instilled in my siblings and me, motivated me to keep public service at the center of my future endeavors.”

Coming off such a satisfying externship, she has become an enthusiast of experiential learning. “There are certain things that you do not learn in the classroom,” says Saforo. “It was great to develop the practical skills of becoming an effective attorney by working with government counsel.”

That’s precisely the goal of GW Law’s Field Placement Program—the law school’s preeminent externship program, says McCoy. “Because of our phenomenal location in the heart of D.C. and the more than 500 students who extern each year, it is one of the largest legal externship programs in the entire country. Student externs add critical bullet points to their resumé and develop invaluable professional networks—ultimately helping them secure their dream jobs.”