

JUSTICE FOR ALL

A fellowship program is supporting clients in need and training the state's next generation of nonprofit lawyers.

BY HANNAH KIDDOO

For a time, Kaylee, whose real name has been modified to protect her identity, was a kid with no place to live. A motivated 16-year-old who had already obtained her high school diploma, Kaylee held a steady job and was looking for an apartment. But as a minor, she needed a parental co-signer to begin renting. Kaylee had moved to Abilene on her own; her mother lived more than 150 miles away, and her father was imprisoned. The situation left her without a permanent place to live. When she found Emily Schools at Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas, Kaylee had been making ends meet by staying with a co-worker. After learning about Kaylee's situation, Schools was able to help her become emancipated from her parents—the final step in securing a place to call home.

"She is a prime example of the kind of kids that I work with," Schools said. "Not only is she homeless, but she's also unaccompanied. She is indigent. She has no relatives that live here."

Nearly 15 years ago, the Texas Access to Justice Foundation began a partnership with Equal Justice Works, a national nonprofit, to provide young Texas lawyers and law students with opportunities to implement personalized projects aimed at disenfranchised sections of society. When Schools applied to be a member of EJW's 2013 fellowship class, she proposed a plan to establish juvenile intake procedures at Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas and to provide education and advocacy for youth.

Funded by TAJF, Schools has been executing her project, working directly with more than 50 juveniles in Abilene—many unaccompanied—who need help with a variety of legal issues. Crime and truancy are common themes. Many of the situations involve expunctions—requests to wipe records from permanent files. Often, the youths simply need someone to walk them through the process and help them understand their individual rights.

"When people are coming out of the juvenile justice system or the criminal justice system, they often don't know what level of offense they were charged with, what the disposition was in their case, and how to answer questions about their criminal background," Schools said.

Using a holistic approach, Schools has developed handbooks on legal rights and resources to distribute to youths and youth advocates and fostered relationships with community leaders and educators to tackle challenges unaccompanied youths face. She served as a key player in the push to implement a new way of addressing truancy in the Abilene public school system—one that

would not simply issue punishment but use intervention, a prevention survey conducted by school counselors to identify motivations or causes for missing school, and an optional life skills course as a last resort for those who are not attending classes. The plan was implemented this fall.

Having grown up in small New Mexico towns, Schools relates with the teens she works with. She knows first-hand what it is like to live in places where finding something entertaining is tough but finding trouble proves easy. Abilene youths, she explains, face similar challenges.

The ability to relate to a targeted population is common among fellows, according to Lisa Melton, a special project manager at the TAJF. "A key indicator that a project will be successful is typically found in the personal stories of the applicants," she said. "When they include a testimony that demonstrates a personal tie to the issue they seek to resolve, the power of their ability and commitment is amplified."

Since the foundation began its partnership with EJW, dozens of fellows have had the chance to champion causes close to their hearts. But the fellowship selection process is highly competitive. Applicants must first identify a willing and qualifying nonprofit to work with and develop a project. Sponsors then review the applications and decide whom they would like to support. Slightly more than 10 percent of those selected for membership in the 2014 class are from Texas, a number that falls just behind California and New York. And those Texas participants are backed by an assortment of generous donors, from larger firms and organizations such as TAJF that sponsor fellows as a whole to anonymous contributors who give financial support directly to the program.

"Every year there are outstanding applicants and projects that don't get funded because of limited resources," said Tammy W. Sun, senior manager of fellowships and advancement at EJW. "TAJF would love to see more law firms and corporations join us in sponsoring fellows."

After all, those fellowships can have a lasting impact. In Abilene, Schools is determined to have the changes she has made in the community remain in place after her time there concludes. To do so, she is preparing others to take on the cases if she is not retained by Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas. "Whether or not I am picked up as a staff attorney once my fellowship funding ends, the project and its mission to serve these kids will live on." **TBJ**

FELLOWS IN TEXAS

There are currently 11 Equal Justice Works fellows in Texas, all of whom are working with nonprofits to support the unmet needs of people in under-represented situations. While each individual has a unique mission, each holds a passion for the cause. The following is just a peek into the ways current fellows are impacting the Lone Star State with their projects.

ERIN GAINES

Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Victoria

Advocates for access to safe housing in underserved neighborhoods along the Texas Gulf Coast's industrial areas.

OLIVIA MATHIAS

Catholic Charities' St. Frances Cabrini Center for Immigration Legal Assistance, Houston

Represents victims of human trafficking and is developing a procedural framework for legal aid nonprofits and pro bono attorneys.

"The fact that so many people are alarmed to hear that human trafficking is not just happening abroad shows how skilled the traffickers are at concealing the crime. I spend a significant portion of my time educating people about what human trafficking actually is and raising awareness about its impact."

MANI NEZAMI

Earl Carl Institute for Legal and Social Policy, Houston

Represents children in the criminal justice, mental health, and foster care systems and encourages a new approach of each child having one dedicated attorney through these various phases.

"I applied to law school with the sole intent of making a career out of working in the public interest arena. Working with children is not only a fulfilling part of my job but is also one of the most important responsibilities I have ever had."

MEGAN SHEFFIELD

Equal Justice Center, Austin

Educates remote areas of Central, North, and Northwest Texas about the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.

ELIZABETH HASSE

Tahirh Justice Center, Houston

Represents immigrant women and girls who have been detained after fleeing gender-based violence and mentors other pro bono attorneys to provide legal services to these clients.

GONZALO SERRANO

Equal Justice Center, Dallas

Represents low-earning immigrant men and women in wage and employment cases.

"Growing up, I often witnessed the injustices that the hardworking immigrant community, including my parents, suffered at the hands of unscrupulous employers. Early on, I developed a strong desire to arm myself with the necessary tools to be a voice for those in my community that would otherwise be forced to live in silence. My Equal Justice Works fellowship allows me to serve the community that I so deeply cherish."

JOHNATHAN SILVA

Lone Star Legal Aid, Houston

Represents veterans whose benefits have been denied.

"People always praise the work I am doing because veterans are in need of legal services more than ever. It is a top priority in the public interest law field to help them obtain the benefits they have earned from the VA."

AMANDA PFEIFFER

Lone Star Legal Aid, Houston

Is creating a multi-organization referral program to serve refugee families and immigrant victims of domestic violence.

EMILY SCHOOLS

Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas, Abilene

Advocates for youth struggling with homelessness and the barriers created by their prior involvement with the justice system.

PETER MCGRAW

Texas RioGrande Legal Aid, Corpus Christi

Partners with local authorities to coordinate civil and criminal defense legal services and provides civil representation for people with mental illness.

"I've found that people glaze over when I talk about collateral consequences and recidivism. But when I describe the project in concrete terms—like, I try to help people with serious mental illness get public benefits or make sure that a temporary mental health crisis doesn't also jeopardize a person's parental rights—then people respond."

STEPHANIE TRUONG

South Texas College of Law
Randall O. Sorrels Legal Clinics, Houston

Provides legal advocacy and support to youth aging out of foster care in Harris County.

"We petitioned the court to authorize one of our clients to consent to her own medical care. . . . Our client took the initiative to become knowledgeable about the psychotropic meds she was taking and, after the court successfully granted our motion, worked with her psychiatrist to safely wean herself off some of those medications."

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON EQUAL JUSTICE WORKS FELLOWSHIPS AND TO LEARN HOW YOU CAN SUPPORT THE PROGRAM IN TEXAS, GO TO TAJF.ORG OR EQUALJUSTICEWORKS.ORG.