New fellowship aids pro bono work

BY JACK SILVERSTEIN
Law Bulletin staff writer

Law school graduates seeking public-interest work now have another opportunity: the Post Graduate Legal Fellowship Program.

A partnership between the Illinois Bar Foundation and three Illinois law schools, the fellowship gives three graduates a $50,000 stipend each plus benefits for one year of pro bono work at the graduate’s respective law school.

The $50,000 is split evenly between the IBF and each respective law school, which will then provide its standard employee benefits.

“It’s great training. It’s great resume building. It’s great networking in the pro bono public service community,” said Dean David N. Yellen of Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

The recipients — named last week — are Juan Mejia from University of Illinois College of Law, Alexis Simmons from Northern Illinois University College of Law and Loyola graduate Emily Vaughan.

Mejia will work at U. of I.’s Civil Litigation Clinic as a supervising attorney for clinic students on cases and help them search for alternatives to litigation.

Vaughan joins Loyola’s Community Law Center Clinic, where she will primarily represent children in custody cases and handle landlord-tenant issues.

Simmons will return to the Zeke Giorgi Legal Clinic in Rockford where she worked while in law school. She will work on cases in family law and wills, trusts and probate.

“During my time with the clinic, I was lamenting over the fact that my experience would be ending in May,” Simmons said. “When the fellowship opportunity came up I was really excited.”

The fellowship continues the trend of facilitating pro bono careers and assisting law school graduates during their respective job searches.

This month, the IBF announced $242,500 worth of grants given to 30 nonprofit legal-aid groups. In June, Northwestern University School of Law gave 10 pro bono fellowships funded by the Jay Pritzker Foundation.

In January, Northwestern and University of Chicago Law School became participants in the Law School Partnership Project with Gideon’s Promise, a program that links graduates with public defender offices, primarily in the South.

These initiatives, along with ones taken by individual schools, are all designed to counter the impact of the recession on both the legal market and pro bono organizations.

“We have these two natural constituents: lawyers who want a job and people who need help,” said IBF Executive Director David Michael Anderson. “I think it’s a perfect mesh between those two.”

All involved regard the fellowship as unique for its pairing of the IBF directly with law schools rather than with pro bono organizations.

“I value it as a model of partnering with the legal community to help our students, to help the legal profession, to have better-trained lawyers and, most importantly, to help our communities to have access to justice and to make sure that they have better access to justice,” said NIU Dean Jennifer L. Rosato Perea.

Anderson said the IBF has not yet decided how it will proceed in the future, but the organization wants to expand beyond the current three schools to create a competitive process. Rosato Perea and Yellen both plan to continue program participation.

For the students, the hope is that the fellowship will be the first step toward their legal careers.

“When I feel like my day is going crum m y, it seem s to allow us to forget about all of those things that are pretty insignifi-cant in comparison to other people’s hefty problems,” Mejia said. “That’s what I value about pro bono work.”