Fighting for the Little City

A lot of people go to law school with aspirations to stand up for the little guy. BAILEY STANDISH is one of them. Her little guy, however, is the City of Aurora, Illinois. Standish, a 3L at Northern Illinois University (NIU) College of Law, grew up in Aurora and still calls it home.

Aurora began as a mill town. It later underwent economic growth as a manufacturing hub including railcar construction.

It is also a city of firsts. Aurora was the first US city to solely use electric lights for public lighting. This feat earned Aurora its nickname as the City of Lights. The city also established the first free public school district in Illinois.

In the 1980s, the city’s unemployment rate grew as factories closed. As is common with unemployment and job losses, storefronts went vacant leading to further economic struggles.

“Although it is perceived as having high crime rates, Aurora had no homicides in 2012,” said Standish. “A negative perception and a struggling economy resulted in abandoned store fronts and a need to revitalize. I love Aurora. It is a city in transition. It doesn’t have a great reputation, but there is this awesome core group of people that want to make Aurora different and raise its profile.”

Standish saw the need but was uncertain how to help. She started meeting with a growing group of concerned citizens, mostly artists and writers. As a law student, she wanted to help, too.

She found opportunity to contribute with her skills. She is helping to found a nonprofit organization that serves as an apprenticeship program for Aurora-based youth. The asset-funded program will facilitate mentoring relationships to help young people develop skills or a trade.

Aurora has many young people who “have passion, intellect, and drive, but may not be able to afford schooling,” said Standish. Depending on the participant’s interest, the mentors include, among others, a graphic designer, a financial advisor, and a vinyl lettering artist. This program is designed to fill an educational gap for the community.

In a more legal capacity, Standish helped NIU start a new clinical program based on its medical-legal partnership with Aunt Martha’s Health Center and Hesed House Shelter and Transitional Living Community. The clinic opened its doors in January and began providing legal services to community members. In preparation for the clinic’s opening, Standish, with two other students, prepared agreements for NIU, Aunt Martha’s, and Hesed; research documents for the medical staff on legal issues; and intake documents for clients.

As the project came to fruition, one of the obstacles Standish encountered was “learning to work with medical staff and speak with doctors. It’s like we are speaking different languages.”

The clinic is housed inside Hesed House located in Aurora, nearly 30 miles from NIU’s campus. Aunt Martha’s runs a health clinic onsite. The three entities collectively provide significant resources to the Aurora community. Reflecting on this effort, Standish said, “When you help the most needy in a community, you help everyone in the community.”

Like many 3Ls, she isn’t sure what the next step is, but she knows that she wants to keep fighting for her little guy.

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