

4-15-1991

GGU Law Students: Taking Responsibility for the Future of Public Interest Lawyers

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Recommended Citation

"GGU Law Students: Taking Responsibility for the Future of Public Interest Lawyers" (1991). *Press Releases*. Paper 1.
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NEWS FROM GOLDEN GATE UNIVERSITY School of Law

For Immediate Release

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Mailed: April 15, 1991

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GGU Law Students: Taking Responsibility for the Future of Public Interest Lawyers

SAN FRANCISCO — Like many young law students, Nancy Roeser wants to change the world or at least a small part of it. She dreams of the day when she can work for one of the public interest organizations that try to make life a little better, if not for everyone, then at least for some. That's why she came to Golden Gate University School of Law. It's also one reason why she is spearheading a campaign here to help those who go into public interest law stay there.

It's a grass-roots campaign of students taxing themselves by voting to increase their student fees and some also pledging a day of their summer earnings, added to a \$25,000 seed provided by the law school from its administrative budget, a more than \$1,700 disbursement from the National Association for Public Interest Law. By the end of the year, the backers of this campaign hope to have approximately \$50,000, which will generate interest that will be used to provide grants to attorneys in public interest law. This grant money will help defray the massive student-loan debts many young attorneys carry with them into practice.

The members of the Public Interest Law Foundation, the student group behind this endeavor, admit even \$50,000 isn't much, but they are quick to add the qualifier "yet." Their

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Public Interest Loan Program
Add one

goal is to see the seeds they are planting now, through their pledge drives, grow into a formidable fund which will be able to provide significant assistance in the years ahead.

Called the Public Interest Loan Assistance Program, it is significant because of the unique student commitment. When the Student Bar Association held its elections in early April, there was a proposition on the ballot to increase student fees by \$10 per student per semester. The measure passed overwhelmingly.

Of the other law schools offering such a program in Northern California, Roeser knows of no other which has asked students to, in effect, tax themselves to help each other, and to pledge a portion of their earnings. But it is this commitment which she and other students involved in PILF believe will keep the program growing in the coming years.

"Even many students planning to go into other kinds of law support this program," Roeser said. "They understand how hard it is to survive financially because the salaries are so much lower." She believes it ultimately comes down to a question of choice, of following your dreams and believing they can become reality. "This program is geared to helping students who otherwise wouldn't have a choice, who would have to give up what they know they want to do, simply to pay off their loans. Their commitment to public interest law is as important as any other student's commitment to corporate or criminal or tax law. I think the students appreciate that. I think that's why so many people have gotten involved and are helping. It's a matter of choice."

It also shows commitment to public interest law, Roeser said. "Even those who plan to go into corporate law or criminal law understand how financially difficult it is to go into

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Public Interest Loan Program
Add two

public interest law and make a living, especially when you have student loans that can cost anywhere from \$500 to \$1,500 a month."

In the public sector, the average starting salaries for attorneys is about \$21,000 annually or a little more than \$400 a week before taxes. In large private firms, a first-year associate makes more than three times that. For students confronted with large student loans, financial realities can and often do compromise their dreams of working in public interest law. At Golden Gate University, which is a private university with a long-standing commitment to public interest law, it is an especially poignant reality.

Golden Gate University School of Law is the only private law school in San Francisco that is part of the Public Interest Law Consortium, and it attracts large numbers of students who hope to one day serve the poor or others who traditionally have gone without legal representation, work for community causes, or become involved in government agencies. When the PILF of which Roeser is the GGU chapter president surveyed students at the law school, they discovered that more than a third applying for financial assistance hope to go into public interest work. But after graduation, when the harsh realities of student loan indebtedness set in, only a scant 7 percent are able to actually practice public interest law and pay back their loans.

"The need at Golden Gate is especially great because it is a private school and the tuition is high." Tuition and fees averaged nearly \$11,000 a year in 1990. By the time students graduate, the average student-loan debt is \$32,000. Even at 10 percent interest, these loans can easily double over the repayment period. "Many recent graduates and current students have watched their dreams of serving the public fade as they face student loans

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Public Interest Loan Program
Add three

which can exceed \$50,000," the PILF explained to the university's Board of Trustees in a memorandum, asking for approval for the loan assistance program. "Facing such monthly payments, most students bury their altruistic goals and seek employment based solely on pay. There is a real need for public interest attorneys and we are helping more attorneys feel they can meet that need."

Roeser and the other students involved in this new loan assistance program hope to circumvent this pattern by giving public interest attorneys — and those hoping to go into that field — options. They say that is the real heart of the new program. "We're providing a choice. Students come here with high aspirations to go into public interest work, we want to help them realize that goal," Roeser said. "This program will promote the student's belief that he or she can go into public interest work while repaying their loans."

While Golden Gate University School of Law is one of only 35 law schools in the country to initiate such a program, it is part of a large group in Northern California to do so. Some programs, like the one at Stanford University, have been operating successfully for several years, others are new, and each has its own unique twist. But all have one commonality: they provide public interest attorneys with a little breathing room when it comes to repaying student loans.

No one knows yet how many grants can be initially awarded and for how much — that depends on how well the PILF seeds grow in the coming months, but the students are optimistic. On the first day of a two-week pledge drive, in which students pledged a day of their summer earnings, PILF had already reached its goal of 50 pledges. And the university is expected to supplement anywhere from \$25,000 to \$75,000 next year, depending on

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Public Interest Loan Program
Add four

revenues, to the program. "We want to build a program that is long lasting," Roeser said. "We know that in the first few years, we won't be able to offer more than two or maybe three grants, but eventually it could help many people."

The details on the grants program are still being worked out, but the grants are earmarked for GGU alumni, working in public interest law, who demonstrate financial need. "It's totally based on financial need," Roeser said. The first grants will be available during the spring of 1992 and will be made based on the recommendations of a screening committee consisting of students, faculty, alumni, financial aid officers, and administration. "This absolutely is a joint venture between the students and the administration," Roeser said.