DU Launches Legal Clinic for Veterans

By Colleen C. Derda, A’83

Duquesne has a rich history of serving those who have served in the military. Now, the University is offering legal assistance to veterans with one of the nation’s first criminal law veterans’ clinics.

Student John Woodruff has a special perspective on the School of Law’s newest clinical education program. “As a member of the armed forces myself, I see that most—if not all—of the veterans truly want to do better and just need the structure and support offered by the staff and programs of Veterans Court to succeed,” says Woodruff, a Duquesne law student and 2nd Lt., U.S. Marine Corps.

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Woodruff and other students work under the direction of the clinic’s supervising attorneys to represent former military members in Veterans Court, a treatment court of the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas. The students prepare and present cases for disposition and stay in close contact with the veterans to ensure they are following court-ordered treatment plans.

“Duquesne has one of the first criminal law veterans’ clinics in the nation,” says Laurie Serafino, the University’s new director of clinical legal education and associate law professor, who supervises more than 20 attorneys and manages the work of more than 100 students involved in 12 clinical programs in Pittsburgh.

She says Duquesne’s rich history in clinical education and deep commitment to public service brought her to the University.

Law Students Advance to Championship

The School of Law team of Colin Esgro, Elsbeth Koefer, Erica Lombardo and Ryan Wilk advanced to the championship round of the National Civil Trial Competition in Santa Monica, Calif., in November. The Duquesne team competed against 15 other law schools before losing in a split decision to Syracuse University College of Law. The competition only accepts the top trial advocacy teams in the country. Adjunct professors Sarah Bronder, L’12, and Amy Joseph Coles served as coaches. Adjunct professors Lisa Barnett, L’09, and Manning O’Connor II, L’83, assisted the team. Professor Amelia Michele Joiner, L’02, directs the University’s trial advocacy program.
Duquesne’s new Veterans Clinic is one of 12 clinics and externship programs Laurie Serafino oversees at Duquesne.

The University’s new director of clinical legal education and associate law professor launched a long-term strategy for the programs and created a plan to involve more research faculty in the clinical legal education department. It’s all part of her mission to raise the profile of the School of Law’s overall program.

“Laurie brings a wealth of talent to the law school,” says Law Dean Ken Gormley. “A nationally recognized leader in the field of clinical legal education, she has endless enthusiasm and energy for building the program here at Duquesne and making it one of the top programs in the United States.”

Serafino most recently directed clinical programs at Pepperdine University School of Law, where she administered multiple clinics and externship placements for students with the U.S. State Department, federal courthouses, private companies and public interest law firms. She practiced law in California for 30 years, primarily as a criminal defense attorney.

“Duquesne provides law students with incredible opportunities to apply theoretical concepts and skills they have learned in the classroom to actual legal practice,” says Serafino. “Equally important, our clinics address real needs in the community, as evidenced by the partnership between Duquesne and the Allegheny County Veterans Court.”

The Hon. John Zottola, director of the Veterans Court, feels the law students’ work is an important component of the program.

“The role of Duquesne’s clinic in Veterans Court is to protect and preserve the rights of our veterans as they journey through the criminal justice system and attempt to regain their lives,” says Zottola.

Duquesne hopes the partnership between the court and the clinic leads to saving tax dollars that would otherwise have been directed to the veterans’ representation, keeping local veterans’ recidivism rates low.

Students meet with the veterans, discuss their cases and treatment plans during phone consultations, and accompany them to court appearances.

Daniel Kunz, the clinic’s supervising attorney, guides the students and leads them in rigorous coursework related to criminal process and procedure, probation and parole, and ethics issues. Debra Barnisin-Lange, senior assistant district attorney, co-teaches the classroom component.

Classroom and other clinic space in Fisher Hall is filled to capacity this year. It’s one of the many reasons the University is raising funds for an expanded clinical location in a separate facility. The proposed site, at 914 Fifth Ave. in Pittsburgh’s Uptown neighborhood and in close proximity to the courthouses, will be more convenient and accessible for the public.

The project moved ahead this year with a $250,000 grant from the Allegheny County Redevelopment Authority for furnishing and purchasing equipment for the building. Pennsylvania Senator Jay Costa Jr., L’89, supported the application, as did other local and state elected officials.

For information about naming opportunities for the new building and interior spaces, contact the Development Office at 412.396.5690. For information about the clinical legal education programs, call 412.396.4704.