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Through a Soros Justice Fellowship, Ronald Chatters III is working this year and next to advocate for prison and criminal justice reform in Los Angeles.

Focused on Criminal Justice

By Jeffrey Raymond

Some kids grow up thinking about spending their lives in sports or entertainment. Ronald Chatters III grew up thinking about prisons and criminal justice.

His father was one of several people close to him who served time during Chatters' childhood in Southern California. He saw that prisons were focused more on punishment than rehabilitation and began asking himself, "What are we doing as a society to help prisoners return to the community so they don't go back to prison?"

Backed by a Soros Justice Fellowship, Chatters, 28, is taking two years to help the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California address that question before returning to the School of Law for his third

and final year in 2012-13. Prison reform and broader criminal justice reform have been unpopular crusades in recent decades, but Chatters thinks the time is right to press the issue.

"With federal and state governments running deficits, people are thinking about how governments are spending their money," Chatters says. "You can inspire people to think about things in a different way."

Chatters landed at the School of Law when he was named a Leadership Scholar, an honor that provides tuition assistance to selected students. That award helped persuade him to attend the University of Maryland over other institutions. Plus, with the School of Law's tradition of public service, he's been able to balance classes as well as work in local clinics that address criminal justice.

Before arriving in Baltimore, he earned a Masters in Public Affairs from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and a Bachelor of Arts from Columbia University. Both schools gave Chatters full tuition scholarships. "I wouldn't be where I am if people didn't believe in me and the work I've done," he says.

The Soros Justice Fellowship will allow him to advocate for Los Angeles County inmates with disabilities who must reapply to have their Social Security benefits restored after they are released. California's Board of Corrections has determined that even a short gap between release and the resumption of benefits strains former inmates' ability to adjust to society and contributes to recidivism. Chatters will work to bring agencies and communities together to address this challenging issue. He also will organize communities most impacted by incarceration in Greater Los Angeles by training them in advocacy strategies to bring about policy changes. "It's time that everyone has a seat at the policy-making table," Chatters says.

Upon earning his JD, he would like to become a consultant on prison and criminal justice reform. "I see myself going where the causes are," he says, "where the need is."

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