WOMEN "FELLOWS"

The Rose Zetzer Fellows Break Glass Ceilings and New Ground

Suffragette and activist Rose Zetzer paved the way for today's female attorneys as the first female member of the Maryland Bar Association.
University of Maryland School of Law student Lisa Yonka Stevens researched affirmative action at the National Women's Law Center in Washington, D.C. Leslie Lobos educated immigrant women about labor laws at Casa de Maryland, a community organization dedicated to improving the lives of the Latino community. Meanwhile, while working in the office of Maryland State Senator Lisa Gladden, former mental health worker Leah Durant—now focused on advocacy—witnessed firsthand how female political leaders can affect societal change.

These three 2004 graduates are among the first ten fellows in the Law School's Women, Leadership, and Equality (WLE) Program. Their practicum experiences, combined with research opportunities, coursework, and workshops, have ratcheted up their legal learning with a strong emphasis on women's issues.

Launched with a $250,000 grant from the Marjorie Cook Foundation in July 2002, WLE is already gaining the support of prestigious faculty at the likes of Yale and Stanford law schools. But it is also attracting a whole new breed of law students to the University of Maryland.

WLE is an outgrowth of the 2001 American Bar Association Summit on Women & Leadership. "The concern was that this generation of law students was not aware of all the struggles that it took to break the glass ceiling and make the gains that they have," says Professor Paula Monopoli, current director of the WLE program.

"It is important for future generations of women lawyers to be able to place themselves in a social and historical context," Dean Karen Rothenberg says. "In the legal profession, even though half of the people going to law school are women, only a small percentage of female attorneys are managing partners of large firms or serve in the legislature or judiciary." But now, by sheer numbers, notes Dean Rothenberg, they are in a position to effect change within the profession.

Funding WLE was a natural fit for the Marjorie Cook Foundation, says Sandra Gohn ('79), one of the foundation's trustees. "The Marjorie Cook Foundation was created at Ms. Cook's death to promote the equality of women under the law. The trustees of the foundation thought that there could be no more appropriate way to promote that equality than through a program at the law school focusing on women, leadership, and equality," Gohn said.

The WLE fellows, who receive a $250 honorarium, are formally known as the Rose Zetzer Fellows, named after a friend and colleague of Cook's. Both Zetzer and Cook were women's rights advocates. Zetzer graduated from the University of Maryland School of Law in 1925. However, it was not until after WWII—more than two decades later—that she was finally admitted to the Maryland State Bar Association as its first female member.

"Rose Zetzer really personifies many of the goals of the program," says Rothenberg. Not only did she pave the way for future female attorneys, she marched with suffragists, fought for the passage of the women's jury bill, and lobbied Congress for the right of married women to work and for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, among other accomplishments.

In addition to promoting equality for women in the legal profession, one of the key goals of WLE is that its fellows, like Zetzer, be well-versed in women's policy issues. Prospective fellows apply in the spring of their second year, and must take either the Women and Leadership Seminar or Women and Law Seminar as a prerequisite. Monopoli notes that applicants must display a significant interest in women's issues, and are evaluated on their undergraduate performance, work experience, and law school performance to date.

In the fall semester of their third year, fellows spend at least sixteen hours each week working for national or local organizations that focus on legal and policy issues affecting women, such as the International Association of Women Judges, the NOW Legal Defense Fund, the Maryland Women's Law Center, and House of Ruth Maryland, a domestic violence center in Baltimore.

The fellows also take a workshop, featuring guest speakers from a variety of law-related settings—law firms, business, the judiciary, public service, et al.—sharing their perspectives on the challenges they have faced and the insights gained. But the workshop also focuses on career survival skills, such as figuring out organizational dynamics, negotiating, and networking. It also provides students with the awareness that they're not the only ones running up against common women's issues, such as work-family balance—a major cause of drop-out in the legal profession.

"I can teach them to think like lawyers, but if they don't stay in the profession long enough to practice those skills, then I haven't accomplished my job," Monopoli says. "We'll have to see five and ten years from now whether these groups of women we are turning out have a better ability to remain in the profession and be successful."

The first class of fellows is optimistic that success will be theirs.

"Hearing the stories of other women prompted me to think about what I might do to one day change the legal workplace in order to level the playing field," says fellow Durant. "The classroom sessions also made me think more about the skills needed to become a success in any profession."

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