

Logging Time At LEGAL AID U.

New online training course helps young advocates hone vital skills

The video comes on, streaming over the Internet. The scene is a dingy urban neighborhood. Mona, the main character, crosses the street to catch a bus. She's bundled up and in a hurry, trying to get to an appointment across town. The voiceover kicks in. "I came here three years ago for a better job," Mona explains. But the single mom's life is rife with hardship. Her kids are mad at her for working weekends, and she has had no luck getting them into after-school programs. Money is always tight. "I'm afraid they'll take away my place because I've been late on my rent," she says. "At least my family is together. The girl who lives in the next building has been fighting for custody for two years."

Mona, it turns out, is an actress who is rather convincingly playing the role of a legal aid client as part of an innovative new online course launched this year for legal aid attorneys seeking to hone their skills to better assist low-income clients. Mona's character adds a real-life dimension to the multimedia-enhanced, Internet-driven Legal Aid University.

Legal Aid U. started in New England with \$250,000 in seed money awarded by the Legal Services Corporation to Legal Services Law Line of Vermont. Today, the project is managed out of the offices of the Massachusetts Legal Reform Institute in Boston. Legal Aid U.'s first course, targeting young lawyers seeking basic skills training, debuted last year to a pilot audience of eight attorneys. This January, the five-week course had its first paying students, all new lawyers, who helped Mona make her way through the civil justice system by taking part in role-playing exercises in which the attorneys taking the online class interviewed and rendered assistance to the fictional client.

Jennifer Wan was one of the young attorneys who took the course after accepting her first fulltime job in legal aid. After graduating from Fordham University School of Law, Wan was hired to work in the Asian Outreach Unit of LSC-funded Greater Boston Legal Services. Her supervisor encouraged her to sign up for the Legal Aid U. class to sharpen her skills. Wan says she's glad she did. She particularly enjoyed the lessons that allowed advocates to collaborate with one another over the telephone and computer. Together, they parsed statutes, simulated client

interviews, and analyzed the laws applicable to Mona's particular case. The course fortuitously coincided with Wan's first real interviews with clients. "I didn't even know about making an interview plan in advance," Wan says. "I'm a new attorney. I learned a lot."

Heading up the administration of Legal Aid U. is Ellen Hemley, who directs training programs at the Massachusetts Legal Reform Institute and its affiliate, the Legal Aid Training Consortium of New England. She began creating the Internet-based program three years ago, believing that public interest attorneys needed a sophisticated but affordable alternative to conferences and in-person trainings, which can be expensive and burdensome to advocates already managing time-consuming work schedules. Hemley felt that online education, if administered properly, could be more engaging than hearing speakers and panelists lecture to attorneys of whom little is typically expected. To make the Legal Aid U. course memorable, Hemley and her staff created the pitiable Mona character.

Another hallmark of Legal Aid U.'s instructional approach since its inception has been an unmistakably strong emphasis on reinforcing the core mission of legal services to provide meaningful access to justice to those who would otherwise go without. Ordinarily, attorneys who work in legal aid receive their continuing legal education credits through their local bar associations, where classes tend to be generalized and applicable to a range of legal disciplines. Legal Aid U. offers targeted continuing



Legal Aid U. offers the opportunity for advocates to hone their interviewing skills by simulating real client interviews and critiquing one another.



Legal Aid U.'s multimedia approach to online learning utilizes Web pages, telephone conference calls, video streaming, and real-time interaction among participants.

legal education with a specific public interest focus. It is available to every attorney working in the public interest sector, including advocates who live in far-flung locations that may be hours from the nearest legal conference or professional training course. "Many parts of the country have no structured learning resources," Hemley points out.

Going to work at LSC-funded Legal Aid Society of Middle Tennessee & the Cumberland a year after graduating from Harvard Law School in 2003, Sharmila Murthy was thankful for the opportunity to hone her practical lawyering skills at Legal Aid U. While Murthy had done casework for the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau while a law student, it did not take long for her to discover the difference between the relative comforts of the clinical academ-



testing numerous online educational software products, he rejected a traditional, corporate-learning model in favor of a more dynamic, interactive approach. Students participate in class by dialing in on a conference call while simultaneously watching the course unfold on screen with slides, papers, and presentations. The online course lends itself to a mix of different sorts of media, be it audio, video, or

discussion boards. "It's quite different from what you think of as distance or online learning," Koo says. "We don't just download a video, watch it, and take a quiz."

Barbara Stalder, a 2003 University of Houston law graduate, says her time logged at Legal Aid U. helping Mona has already paid real-world dividends. The course offered useful tips to help, and calm, scared and confused clients who seek assistance from Lonestar Legal Aid, where Stalder is a fellow in the Houston office. "The other day I interviewed an older client who was very flustered at fill-

"Because most of the attorneys in my organization are very experienced, most of these skills are second nature to them." —Sharmila Murthy, Legal Aid U. participant

ing out forms," she recalls. "I could see she was having a hard time, so I calmly told her I would ask her the questions and write down the information for her. She immediately relaxed and the interview went great from there." That was a tension-melting tactic that Stalder picked up from Legal Aid U.

"Clients who seek assistance from a legal aid attorney often have barriers that the average, everyday working-class person does not," Stalder says. "The impoverished client may have language or speech issues, may be uneducated or undereducated, or may not have access to resources that the average person takes for granted—like readily accessible transportation or child care. Because of these issues, the impoverished client may need to be handled in a different way." Legal Aid U. never lets the attorneys enrolled in the course forget the unique plight of the client community. Says Stalder: "The online skills program really helped me refocus my attention on the client." ■

Gene Koo, another Harvard Law School graduate, oversaw the creation of the interface for Legal Aid U. as a member of the Massachusetts Legal Reform Institute staff. After

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