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Sarah Song is volunteering for the Cabrini Green Legal Aid while on a deferral from the firm Latham & Watkins. (E. Jason Wambsgans, Chicago Tribune / March 28, 2010)

Law school grads use deferred time to work at legal aid groups

Benefits flow both ways: New lawyers gain experience with people, courts; agencies help more poor clients

By Amee Sachdev, Tribune reporter

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Cabrini Green Legal Aid ended its 2009 fiscal year with a deficit for the first time in years. Even though it provided legal aid to more poor people than ever before — 5,348 — the not-for-profit could not afford to hire another full-time attorney on its \$2 million shoestring budget.

Last year's recession also hit Chicago's big law firms that individually generate hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue from corporate clients. They were sitting with an oversupply of lawyers and were forced to lay off hundreds and postpone the starting dates of law school graduates they had hired to begin in the fall of 2009.

The opposite ends of Chicago's legal profession found a way to come together out of economic necessity to partially consume the supply of highly educated young lawyers looking for work. Despite several challenges, the unusual experiment has paid dividends. It also has sparked discussions of

whether a more permanent model of apprenticeships can be developed that would train law-school graduates at a lower cost and benefit public-interest legal organizations that are suffering from funding constraints while attending to a greater need because of the recession.

"We absolutely would do it again," said Robert Acton, executive director of Cabrini Green Legal Aid, or CGLA. "It would be a very generous act on the part of law firms."

Large firms in Chicago and around the country gave away their deferred associates to public-interest legal groups last year. They offered the graduating law students up to half their \$160,000 starting salaries to work at legal-aid groups for a year. Some firms extended the offer to experienced attorneys as well.

The deferments, which were voluntary in some cases, made good business sense too. Law firms experienced one of the worst business markets in decades, as the financial crisis damaged the companies and financial institutions they service. Without transactions to keep armies of young lawyers busy, the pyramid-shaped business model of large firms was vulnerable.

About 60 first-year associates have gone to work for more than 20 public-interest and legal-aid organizations, estimates Kelly Tautges, director of pro bono services at the Chicago Bar Foundation, which has kept track of the placements. Associates also found 12-month internships in government and at law schools. The associates come from nearly all the large firms, including Sidley Austin, Latham & Watkins, Winston & Strawn and McDermott Will & Emery.

Still, the offer of free labor initially met with some resistance in Chicago's legal-aid community. Acton, at first, was one of the loudest critics of the program.

"We're a small staff handling as many clients as possible," he said. "We didn't have built into this system time to spend training and supervising someone who knew little about the subject matter and would only be with us temporarily."

Acton also had a more practical objection. The additional overhead costs of equipment would stretch an already thin budget. Others expressed concerns about the motivation of furloughed lawyers who had been exposed to the trappings of the "Big Law" lifestyle — a private office, free smart phones, break rooms stocked with coffee and snacks, and staff to meet their every need.

Acton and other critics have been pleasantly surprised.

Sarah Song, 26, who graduated from Columbia Law School in New York last year, is one of two deferred associates who joined CGLA in September. Song, who grew up in Skokie, was looking forward to beginning her career at Latham & Watkins, one of the nation's elite firms, when she was asked to postpone her start date.

She had the option of taking her \$75,000 stipend with no strings attached but she volunteered for a public-interest job. Some other incoming associates at Latham opted to take the year off. Song said one appeared on a reality television show and another traveled to South America to study Spanish. She has no regrets.

Song is working in the housing law division, which helps tenants, many of whom live in public housing or receive government subsidies, who are being evicted. She sent her resume to several groups and was hired by CGLA because she had prior experience in housing through summer internships and clinical work in law school, Acton said.

When asked what she has learned, Song said, "Where do I start? I've learned about courtroom etiquette and professionalism. I'm also working with clients on a daily basis. You learn to navigate relationships with different personalities and needs. I've also learned a lot about housing law."

Most first-year associates never see the inside of a courtroom, let alone have daily client interaction.

Song added: "The experience has prepared me for my future."

In fiscal 2009, CGLA accepted 120 housing cases that were all handled by one staff attorney. The case load is expected to be the same or more this year, and Song has "added value within a couple of months," Acton said.

To help balance the budget in 2010, CGLA's staff, which includes nine full-time attorneys, agreed to a salary freeze and the elimination of a match for employee retirement funds. Legal-aid attorneys across the Chicago area are making similar sacrifices because of shrinking public and private funding.

Illinois cut legal aid funding by 50 percent in 2009, to \$1.75 million, said Bob Glaves, director of the Chicago Bar Foundation. Another source, the Lawyers Trust Fund of Illinois, which pools the interest collected on client trust funds, has reduced charitable donations by 35 percent in its current fiscal year because of persistently low interest rates, he said.

The Lawyers Trust Fund is the single largest donor for Chicago Volunteer Legal Services, said Margaret Benson, executive director. She had no qualms about accepting furloughed lawyers and hired six, including Shirley Chiu, who was laid off from McDermott Will & Emery in June.

McDermott gave her the option of taking her severance pay in a lump sum or paying her to work for a nonprofit through the rest of 2009. Chiu, 30, chose the latter because she was looking to change directions with her legal career. After working as a tax lawyer for nine months at McDermott, she decided that the complexities of the Internal Revenue Code were not that interesting.

Chiu wanted to move into consumer-protection law and noticed that Benson's organization represents low-income residents whose homes are in foreclosure. She loves the work. Three months after her severance ran out, Chiu continues to volunteer for Chicago Volunteer Legal Services while looking for a job in the nonprofit world.

"With a nonprofit, there will be tradeoff in lifestyle, but you don't have the corporate pressure," Chiu said. "In terms of Big Law, I really don't miss anything."

The experience in public interest law is helping change perceptions among lawyers who have not had much exposure to nonprofits. Dan Spira, 26, was excited to start at Sidley Austin last year after graduating from Washington University School of Law in 2009. He has spent the last six months at Equip for Equality, a legal advocate for the disabled.

"I think sometimes there's the perception that legal-aid lawyers have such a volume of cases they don't have time to give individual attention," Spira said. "I've been very impressed with the quality of attorneys here."

Rachel Margolis, a second Sidley associate at Equip for Equality, represented a client in a mediation at the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and helped him get his job back.

"The client called me back and said I improved the quality of his life," Margolis said. "It's been a rewarding experience."

Benson said the associates will become cheerleaders for legal aid. "They will talk us up in the community," she said. "That will help us in the long run."

asachdev@tribune.com