

## U of M Students Get Head Start On Pro Bono Service

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REBEKAH HEARN | The Daily News

Students at the University of Memphis Cecil C. Humphreys School of Law have formed an organization encouraging volunteer work – even offering the chance to work on actual cases supervised by licensed attorneys.

Christina A. Zawisza, associate professor of clinical law and director of the Child and Family Litigation Clinic at the law school, revived the Public Action Law Society in 2002.

Zawisza, who previously was a legal services attorney for most of her career, now serves as the faculty adviser for the student-run pro bono group, whose existence helps the law school stay in line with the American Bar Association's standards for public service.



**CIRCLE OF ACTION:** From left, Emily Blaiss, C. Grace Whiting, Romona Jackson and Christina Zawisza of the Public Action Law Society confer at the Memphis Area Legal Services office Downtown. -- PHOTO BY REBEKAH HEARN

### Beginning missionaries

Zawisza said “public interest is in my roots, my spirit and my soul.”

“The ABA has a standard for law schools that says the law schools should provide substantial opportunities for pro bono service,” Zawisza said. “That’s because of our code of professional responsibility. In return for the privilege of a law license and practicing law, we serve the less fortunate.”

[C. Grace Whiting](#), a second-year law student at the U of M, is the president of PALS, which has about 30 active members. PALS provides students with the chance to volunteer not only in the legal field, but also in the community at large.

“The mission of PALS is to provide ... both general service opportunities and legal, or pro bono, opportunities. So students can volunteer either with community groups, such as their church or local nonprofit doing non-legal work, or they can actually work with attorneys on pro bono-type cases,” Whiting said.

The group is open to law students in any year, although first-year students often volunteer initially with non-legal groups, because many don’t yet feel comfortable handling legal cases.

Whiting said usually first-year students comprise the largest set of students in the group as they begin to network and learn about the ins and outs of law school.

A volunteer coordinator pairs students with volunteer positions in the area. PALS members are required to keep time sheets and turn in their hours to keep track of how much volunteer work is being done.

“So far, we’ve had over 1,000 hours turned in for students who have either given service this

summer before this semester started or since this semester started,” Whiting said.

The ABA requirement doesn’t mean law schools must have an official organization for volunteerism, but Zawisza said many do offer groups such as PALS.

“By tradition, it’s come to be that in just about every law school, there is an organization that kind of spearheads (volunteer work),” she said.

## Walking the walk

PALS students, once they reach a level of comfort with working on legal cases, can actually serve as co-counsel for certain clients.

### AWARDING THE GIVERS

Students who go above and beyond the basic volunteer requirements are honored at the law school with one of two service awards at the end of each year.

The Dean’s Distinguished Service Award, which can go to more than one recipient, honors several levels of achievement.

A student who gives 15 to 30 hours of service in a school year receives a Bronze Level award. Volunteering 30 to 50 hours a school year boosts the student up to a Silver Award, while 51 to 100 hours of service hours a year make a student eligible for the Gold Award.

The Platinum Award of the Dean’s Distinguished Service Award honors anyone who’s given more than 100 hours of service that academic year.

Also, the school gives to one student a year the Rodney K. Smith Award, which generally is for a student who has volunteered a substantial amount of time during the school year.

Last year, the winner had more than 500 hours of service.

– *Rebekah Hearn*

“We have a fair amount of students who are guardian ad litem, and they work with (Memphis Area Legal Services) for conservatorships,” Whiting said. “There are also a fair number of students who participate in (the Community Legal Center’s) Tuesday night legal clinics and their pro se divorce clinics.”

Whiting said some students have volunteered in government positions and at the Juvenile Court of Memphis and Shelby County. She mentioned one student served as a probation officer for a youth through Juvenile Court.

Many students do a good bit of legwork behind the scenes; Whiting said much of her pro bono work involves research for MALS’ Memphis Fair Housing Center. Local legal aid clinics, such as MALS’ Saturday Legal Aid clinics and Attorney of the Day programs at the Shelby County Courthouse, offer places to form student-attorney relationships.

“Linda Warren Seely (at MALS) coordinates the pro bono program in Memphis, and sometimes she’ll assign a pro bono attorney and the student will work with that attorney,”

Zawisza said.

That was the case with [Emily Blaiss](#), a second-year law student and PALS member. She recently worked directly with Seely on a guardian ad litem case, which let her attend court and get to know the client.

“There are a variety of situations a guardian ad litem is involved with,” Blaiss said. “(In my case), I saw it from beginning to end, I went and visited (the client) in the hospital, I met with her son and daughter. It’s actually hands-on; I went to their house and met with them, and it was just such a heartwarming experience, because they were so appreciative of what I was doing.”

Also, Blaiss got the experience of being called “counsel” by the judge in the courtroom.

“I was very nervous, but I got to report my findings. ... It was kind of my first real legal experience, and I just think law students need to have that before they get out in the world,” said Blaiss, the daughter of local attorney [Sam Blaiss](#).

It was her father's long-standing relationship with pro bono work – and Seely – that got Blaiss involved.

“I just feel a calling to do volunteer work,” said Emily Blaiss, who's been a member of PALS since her first year of law school. Sam Blaiss also is a familiar face at many of the legal aid clinics around town.

With a fee of just \$15 a semester and the chance to win several distinguished awards for service through the law school every year, Whiting and other PALS members hope to bring more students on board.

“I just have big hopes for the students at the U of M, and they need to get more involved because they need the experience,” Blaiss said.