

Clinics provide real-life legal experience

By Elizabeth McGrath,
Notre Dame Law School student

Seated beside a Rwandan refugee in South Bend, second-year law student Dorothy Hassaram sorted through forms as she tried to help her client reunite her African family in the United States.

Notre Dame Law School's Legal Aid Clinic, which provides both general civil and immigration services, was one of the reasons Hassaram chose to study at the school. As a native of Manila, in the Philippines, Hassaram had worked closely with the immigrant community since moving to Los Angeles in 1999. Today, she is inspired by the people she meets at the clinic. She is inspired by the clinic faculty for the passion they bring to their work and by the clients for what they have endured.

"A lot of them have been through so much and they sit in front of you, telling you their story and you wonder, 'How did you come to be sitting in front of me?'" Hassaram said. "They're so strong and I admire them."

The legal clinic is one of several classes where Notre Dame students can earn academic credit while providing pro bono services to the South Bend community. Another class, Law and Poverty, allows students to choose a local organization that serves low-income populations. The students intern while they research academic papers about poverty-related issues. Also, students can conduct an externship with the St. Joseph County Public Defender's Office for academic credit.

Roughly 40 students work at the Legal Aid Clinic each semester in one of two divisions, according to Professor Robert Jones, director of the clinic. The immigration division provides



Notre Dame Law Student Monica Patanhar speaks at St. Margaret's House

services for clients from all over the world, including those who seek asylum after fleeing persecution in Africa, Central America and Eastern Europe, Jones said. The general civil services division assists low-income clients, primarily with consumer issues, landlord tenant issues, mental health issues, and elder law.

Students act as the lead attorneys in their cases and work under the close supervision of the faculty. Students may be responsible for the initial interview with the client, discovery, fact-finding, developing the case theory, or conducting the hearing or trial. The clinic handles 200 to 300 cases at any given time, Jones said. Nearly all of the clinic's clients come from referrals by other agencies, since the clinic does not have the support staff to handle phone calls for assistance directly.

"We're the only legal services provider in northern Indiana that's providing free legal services to asylum

seekers," he said.

Hassaram said the clinic has helped her apply the knowledge she learned during her first year in law school, a time when students are immersed in textbooks and surrounded almost entirely by other law students. Last semester, she worked with four clients. Some of the clients were applying for asylum because they had been persecuted in their home country. Others were petitioning for residency under the Violence Against Women Act, which allows non-citizens to self-petition if they are abused by a spouse that is a citizen or permanent resident.

"I like working with the clients," Hassaram said. "Sometimes they come and have no idea what's going on status-wise, immigration-wise. It's nice to talk to them sitting in front of you and know you're helping them."

The clinic's general civil services division has experienced a large demand for consumer-related issues, particularly mortgage fraud, Jones said. For example, clients may report oppressive terms or that a contractor has taken their money without delivering what was promised.

"There are a lot of situations where we're trying to help people save their homes where they've been defrauded

"A lot of them have been through so much and they sit in front of you, telling you their story and you wonder, 'How did you come to be sitting in front of me?'"

Law student Dorothy Hassaram

See **NOTRE DAME** page 22

NOTRE DAME

Continued from page 9

or ripped off," Jones said.

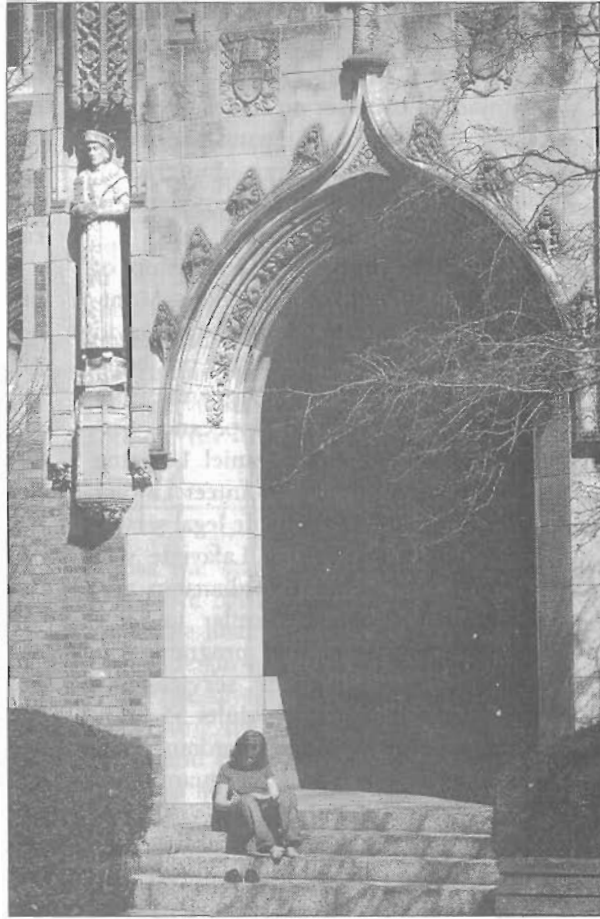
Notre Dame Law School's Law and Poverty class also offers students a chance to assist low-income populations. The class, which is limited to 15 students, has two components, according to Professor Emeritus Thomas Broden.

The first component is an internship with an organization chosen by the student from a list of a dozen or so groups. For example, students have tutored at the Center for the Homeless, worked with domestic violence victims at the prosecutor's office, and participated with the police in crime prevention programs.

"It's designed to give students a first-hand and fairly extensive relationship with a number of low-income persons so they begin to know the person as a person, the same as you or me, not as a separate category of individuals," Broden said.

The second component of the class requires students to research the facets of poverty and the impact of the law by reading law review articles and other academic materials.

One organization that has benefit-



Notre Dame Law School

ed from the program is St. Margaret's House, a South Bend day center that provides assistance to women and children with employment, education, and physical and mental issues. Last semester, second-year law student

Monica Patankar's volunteer work included a presentation on domestic violence to the center's visitors.

"That particular presentation was extremely beneficial to our women," said Patricia Marvel, assistant director at St. Margaret's House. "It was effective. It gave them resources. It gave them hope."

Notre Dame Law School also offers an externship with the public defender's office. Each semester, approximately 20 students work in either Traffic & Misdemeanor Court or at the Juvenile Justice Center. The students work under the direct supervision of assistant public defenders roughly 40 hours each semester, in addition to an hour in class each week. Participants interview clients, stand up with them in front of the judge, and sometimes speak in court when their supervisor is present.

"The main purpose is to give the students an immersion in legal practice in a real setting and thus to enrich their experience as students," said Professor Gerard Bradley, who has taught the class for 10 years. "A second very important goal is to provide legal services to the poor."•