

Touro Law Center Pioneers a New Approach to Legal Education, Providing Access to In-Court Training and Federal Bar Association Membership

by Sandra Disbrow



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When 20 students from the Jacob D. Fuchsberg Touro Law Center exited the Long Island Federal Courthouse on a beautiful spring day last May, phrases like “know your judge,” “know when to sit down,” and “stop arguing after the Court’s ruling” were being tossed around like verbal footballs. The students had just finished their first day of Touro’s Federal Judicial Summer Externship program. The program is the brainchild of Eastern District of New York Senior Judge Leonard D. Wexler. Seven years ago, Judge Wexler approached then Dean Lawrence Raful and offered him a novel way to supplement his students’ legal education—immerse them in his courtroom. Judge Wexler, who has served on the federal bench since 1983, realized that his courtroom could teach the students how to be trial lawyers. Having observed hundreds of young lawyers intimidated by court appearances, Judge Wexler saw a rare opportunity to prepare Touro’s students for the realities of the courtroom by involving them in his trials. Dean Raful jumped at the opportunity and immediately sought his faculty’s approval.

To be clear, this program is far from your typical internship experience. Each summer, Judge Wexler schedules dozens of trials for the month of June. Beginning on day one of the program, with the consent of counsel, students learn about and then participate in jury selections for the upcoming trials. Sitting behind counsel’s table, students debate the pros and cons of the panel with counsel, discuss jurors’ backgrounds and characteristics, and offer opinions regarding the peremptory challenges. As the trials begin in earnest, students discuss evidentiary rulings and trial motions with the judge. In fact, by the end of the summer, students typically participate in six to seven jury selections and observe five trials. They also observe dozens of criminal and civil conferences and spend countless hours evaluating the trial strategies and techniques of experienced attorneys.

“It was incredible to see the impact even a little mistake could have on the outcome of the cases,” said Irene Gaye, a 3L at Touro. “This program was the best experience I had in law school.”

“No class was able to prepare me for how to behave in the courtroom like the externship program did—it was truly empowering,” said Amy Goldenberg, also a 3L. “Judge Wexler’s program opened the door for me to numerous employment opportunities.”

To further the experience, the faculty at Touro Law Center decided to couple the in-court experience with an intensive federal trial advocacy seminar, now taught by Eastern District of New York Chapter President Dina Miller. The curriculum, which is constantly adjusted to keep pace with the proceedings in the courtroom, covers everything from jury selection strategies to effective opening and closing statements, witness preparation, writing for judges, and effective legal negotiation and settlement. Students also attend brown bag lunch seminars where guest lecturers discuss topics like sentencing guidelines, common mistakes in legal writing, approaches to representing criminal defendants and client interviews. Miller, who herself is a former commercial litigator and is now a career law clerk for Magistrate Judge Arlene Lindsay, said, “Our pace is intense, but our students emerge with focus and a sense of confidence in their legal abilities that sets them apart from the crowd.”

Continuously striving to enhance her students’ educational experience, current Touro Dean Patricia Salkin announced that the school will cover the cost of a one-year Federal Bar Association (FBA) membership for any student enrolled in the Federal Judicial Externship Program. “I recognize the educational and networking opportunities offered to students by the FBA,” Dean Salkin said. “I believe membership in the organization will enable students to build upon the foundation created by Judge Wexler during the summer.” ☺