

# Learning What It Means To Be

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**F**orty-five law students discovered over Christmas break that leaving campus is one of the best ways to learn what it means to be a Notre Dame lawyer. While their classmates relaxed after the rigors of final exams, the participants in the Law School's GALILEE program fanned out to six cities across the country for a three-day immersion into the legal problems of the urban poor and the responses of public interest lawyers.

The students heard many voices, ranging from Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan to NDLS grad Zenaida Alonzo, who provides legal

assistance to homeless teens from her minivan. They heard from judges, prosecutors, public defenders, legal aid lawyers, policy advocates, social workers, police officers, and public interest attorneys of all stripes.

Perhaps most importantly, they heard directly from the poor—homeless men and women, the elderly, troubled teens, and inmates. Those voices all conveyed a similar message: the urban poor face a host of injustices, and attorneys can find fulfillment in attempting to address them, whether through full-time public interest work or pro bono efforts.



“GALILEE opened my eyes to the world of public interest law,” commented first-year student William Hannan. Courtney Ridge enthused that “GALILEE was an amazing, unique experience” that “really helped to rekindle why I want to become a lawyer. Notre Dame’s emphasis on being a different kind of lawyer is truly captured in the GALILEE program.”

GALILEE’s most important contribution, say many first-year students, is helping to remind them why they came to law school, and putting flesh on the abstract idea of public interest work. As Sravana Yarlagadda explains, idealism fades in the blur of the first semester of law school. Students are consumed with mastering cases, exposed to a steady parade of

upperclassmen decked out in suits on their way to private law firm interviews, and conscious of the substantial debts they are beginning to incur: “After beginning law school, my plans slowly changed. I was acquainted with

the reality of graduating with incredible student debt. I felt like my professional options were limited by my loan. I slowly left behind what I considered just ‘a little girl’s dream.’ While partial to public service, I began to explore other areas of the legal profession.” GALILEE “caused me to revisit the idea of the law and my role in society as a citizen, as a lawyer, and as a Christian. My experience with GALILEE reminded me that people can and do make a change. My experience with GALILEE provided me with the confidence that I will be able to do what I set out to do many years ago.”

GALILEE (Group Alternative Live-In Legal Experience) is the brainchild of Prof. Teresa Phelps. It is the only program of its type in the country. Twenty-five years ago, Prof. Phelps led the first group of law students on an immersion experience in Chicago. Since then, nearly a thousand students have visited cities across the country and have been transformed by the experience. Modeled after the undergraduate Urban Plunge program, GALILEE requires small groups of students to spend three days living together in an urban area while they visit public interest law offices, social service agencies, and other sites that will help them understand the legal problems of the urban poor. Students also perform a service project during their immersion, such as serving a meal at a soup kitchen or helping out at a homeless shelter. Students participate in half-day retreats before and after their GALILEE experience and write a paper reflecting on their experiences. The program is largely student-run; participants from one year volunteer to organize the recruitment and retreats the following year. Student participants are responsible for choosing the sites they wish to visit and arranging their itineraries.

For many students, GALILEE is a first direct exposure to urban poverty. Nicole Tlachac observed that, “We were a group of five Notre Dame law students, most of whom had never seen or felt the effects of poverty outside the holiday food drives and Toys for Tots our parents participated in.” Zach Dougherty conceded that,

# a Different Kind of Lawyer

“Entire worlds exist in my own country—in my own city—that I basically grew up oblivious to.” “The only solution is exposure,” concludes Thomas Winegar, pleased that GALILEE helps “burst the bubble of privilege” that can surround some students.

Just as the GALILEE experience puts flesh on the abstract notion of urban poverty, it also provides students with a specific understanding of the work of public interest lawyers. For Andrew Soukup, GALILEE “represented an attempt for me to figure out how my broad desire to serve the public good could be channeled toward some specific function.” Krista Yee found that by allowing her to interact with a variety of public interest lawyers, GALILEE enabled her “to get a better sense of what kind of job I would like to pursue upon graduation.” Jessica Burke discovered her “dream job” advocating for



children through the US Attorney’s office. Some students were so excited by what they saw that they do not plan to wait for graduation. Immediately upon returning to South Bend, several students applied for summer jobs at public interest offices they had visited.

Not all GALILEE participants are focused on full-time public interest careers. Many were anxious to learn about pro bono opportunities that could be incorporated into a private practice. To that end, several groups met with pro bono coordinators for large private firms. The GALILEE experience clearly reinforced students’ desire to participate in pro bono efforts and showed them how to do so. As Stephanie Scharrer commented, “Before GALILEE, I was unsure exactly how I would find pro bono opportunities that would interest and stimulate me. Now, I know.”

GALILEE’s impacts may extend overseas as well. Two L.L.M. students from Kenya, Faith Kabata and Caroline Okioga, participated in the New York immersion. They will return home with new ideas about how Kenyan lawyers might engage in both civil poverty-related issues and post-conviction proceedings.

GALILEE provided some photo album memories: meeting an attorney general, riding in a police car on a high speed chase, visiting the FBI’s gun vault, and sitting in on the corruption trial of a former governor. But its lasting impact will stem from the quieter moments, like the intake meeting at Cabrini Green Legal Services, that stirred students’ souls. Students discovered that public interest work is a passionate and fulfilling undertaking, and they began to imagine themselves in the shoes of the lawyers they observed.

Michael Tippy noticed that “at nearly every stop we made we had the opportunity to meet with NDLS alumni who are committed to serving the public good.” Returning to campus, the GALILEE participants may now, in T.S. Eliot’s words, “know the place for the first time.”

**We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.**

—T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*