

## **Community Development**

### **Possibilities for East Tennessee Social Justice Projects Spring 2002**

As you know, a major part of your work in this course will be a field project that you carry out in conjunction with a group in the community. To be appropriate for this course a field project

- must take you beyond the walls of the law school and into contact with people or groups that are dealing with some concrete situation they see as a significant instance of injustice; and
- must be a project that you yourself feel passionately about.

Some of you may come with your own ideas of what you would like to do. If so, let me know as soon as possible so we can talk over your ideas and see if they are a good match for the course. But my guess is that many of you will want to hear about possibilities in the community that you could consider or investigate. So here is a list of possibilities that have come to my attention over the past several weeks or months. The list is designed to convince you that I am serious about the wide variety of projects that can qualify as appropriate fieldwork in this class and to encourage you to think creatively and “outside the box.”

In any event, please feel free to propose your own ideas, and to suggest other kinds of social justice issues and approaches. If you have questions, stop by my office for a chat. The only requirement is to do it soon. The semester will prove frustratingly short, I promise you. Here are the possibilities I want to bring to your attention:

#### **Help to gather material for a play on workplace rights and wrongs**

Collaborate with a visiting theater director/actor/producer who will be working with Carpetbag Theater, a local community-based African-American theater company. Her goal is to interview workers involved with Sincere Seven, a workers’ rights group founded by seven African American workers who were fired for trying to organize a union. The idea is to use the interviews to create a play made up of excerpts from the different narratives. Most of the interviews will focus on problems and rights in the workplace, and the project could use someone who could provide legal background briefings on labor and employment law while also helping to do the interviews and learning about how things look from the workers’ standpoint.

**Develop Know-Your-Rights educational projects with people who usually lack access to good information about their rights and responsibilities.**

There are a number of venues around town where this kind of work will be possible. Specific groups and settings where projects would be welcome this semester include immigrants learning English, mothers on public assistance working toward their GEDs, hourly workers at the university who are trying to organize a union, at-risk high school youth who are involved in an arts group and want to know more about the law, and organizers of a new immigrants' rights group that plans to do community trainings with new immigrants in East Tennessee.

**Learn about law and lawyering on behalf of protesters who engage in civil disobedience**

The Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance works in East Tennessee to protest continued work on nuclear weapons that happens here at the federal facilities in Oak Ridge. Over the years, several local lawyers have provided pro bono legal representation to OREPA activists charged with trespass growing out of the group's annual non-violent civil disobedience on the anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This semester there are hearings scheduled in relation to past OREPA protests. The pro bono lawyers are willing to have law students provide clerking and other support for these cases. Law students could also elect to serve as legal observers at other civil disobedience actions OREPA plans for later in the spring. Alternatively, OREPA has expressed an interest in receiving briefings on the application of international law (including nuclear non-proliferation treaties) to the question of nuclear weapons production at Oak Ridge.

**Work toward local legislation for a living wage**

The Knoxville Living Wage Campaign would like help in drafting revisions to a living wage ordinance that they have introduced -- thus far unsuccessfully -- in the Knoxville City Council. They have also requested legal research and fact investigation concerning the city's current contracting practices and the rules governing them.

**Participate in outreach to local farm workers**

Southern Migrant Legal Services is a satellite project of a venerable, federally funded, farm-worker legal services organization, Texas Rural Legal Aid. SMLS staff attorneys will represent farm workers on employment-related matters in six states in the Southeast. The group just opened an office in Nashville and they have offered to supervise a law student who wants to participate in community outreach to farm worker communities in East Tennessee this spring. The goal is to inform eligible farm workers of SMLS services and to identify cases that might have an impact if litigated. (Spanish language facility would be required for this project.)

**Help low-income home-based child-care providers to improve their situation**

A grassroots action group called Solutions is engaged in a campaign to improve conditions for home-based child-care providers in low-income, inner-city Knoxville communities. The recent

transformation of the welfare system has produced a new occupational niche for women who can care for the children of welfare recipients attempting to make the transition from welfare to work. Many of the caregivers are past recipients themselves, and they are providing an important service. However, compensation rates are low, and many of the regulations are difficult for low-income providers to meet. Solutions is helping to bring these problems to light and demand improved approaches. They need research about the rules and regulations, and help identifying possible handles for reform.

### **Help to create local human rights campaigns in support of global labor rights**

The Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network is a local labor-community coalition active on international labor rights and free/fair trade issues. They want to develop a mechanism through which local activists, including rank-and-file union members, can find out about abuses of labor rights in other countries, and can then take part in “Amnesty-International-style” letter-writing or fax-sending campaigns to support these workers. They also want advice about ways that U.S. trade law and labor law might be involved in these situations, so that their letter-writing can target domestic as well as international decision-makers.

### **Educate and persuade the public about landmark affirmative action litigation now pending**

Landmark litigation on affirmative action in higher education is now working its way through the court system. Controversy already exists at the law school about this case, with various groups and individuals taking various positions. The Black Law Student Association, for instance, is in strong support of affirmative action, while the Federalist Society is strongly opposed. National groups are also active on both sides of this issue.

BLSA leaders at the law school are aware of my own views in support of affirmative action and of my own involvement in advocacy efforts related to the issue. They have expressed an interest in having one or more law students from this class work with them to develop presentations about the pending litigation. Their aim is to educate and persuade law students, undergraduates, and members of the community about this important and controversial matter.

NOTE: Since I have mentioned my own engagement with affirmative action, I want to make especially clear here that my own activities on this matter do not constitute any sort of limit on what students in this class may or should take on. The Federalist Society and other opponents of affirmative action would quite likely be as enthusiastic about help with education and persuasion as BLSA is. Any student who would like to explore that option should certainly feel free to do so. Please come and talk with me if you have any questions about this or about my own involvements.