

Headed for Public Interest Careers, NYU Law Grads Are Tuition-Debt Free



1 **Sonia Lin**
Clerkship: Southern District Judge Denny Chin, New York City

2 **Amanda David**
Public Defender Service for the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C.

3 **Ria Tabacco**
Clerkships: Judge Julia Smith Gibbons, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, Memphis, Tenn.; Southern District Judge Victor Marrero, New York City

4 **Nicholas Durham**
Chadbourne & Parke Fellowship, The Door Legal Services Center, New York City

5 **Sophia Bernhardt**
Equal Justice Initiative Fellowship, Montgomery, Ala.

6 **Ryan Downer**
Clerkship: Judge Martha Craig Daughtrey, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, Nashville, Tenn.

7 **Samuel Roe**
pro bono at Lowenstein Sandler, Roseland, N.J.

8 **Alejandro Fernandez**
Prettyman Fellowship, Georgetown University Law Center, Washington, D.C.

9 **Matthew Copus**
New Mexico Legal Aid Society, Albuquerque, N.M.

10 **Tafadzwa Pasipanodya**
Foley Hoag, Corporate Social Responsibility and Sovereign International Litigation, Washington, D.C.

11 **Diana Reddy**
Clerkship: Judge Warren J. Ferguson, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, Santa Ana, Calif.

12 **Julia Einbond**
Clerkship: U.S. District Court Judge James T. Giles, Eastern District of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

13 **Randi Levine**
Equal Justice Works Fellowship, Advocates for Children, New York City

14 **Mitra Ebadolahi**
Clerkship: U.S. District Court Judge Margaret Morrow, Central District of California, Los Angeles

15 **Holly McIntush**
Clerkship: Judge Diane Henson, Texas Third Court of Appeals, Austin, Texas

16 **Carrie Johnson**
Legal Services of New York City

▲ All smiles: the Root-Tilden-Kern scholars and their new employers

\$2 Million
Approximate value of tuition forgiveness this year

BY THOMAS ADCOCK

THANKS TO the resuscitation of a venerable financial aid program at New York University School of Law, 16 graduates filed out of Madison Square Garden following Wednesday's commencement ceremony with mortarboard tassels shifted, sheepskins in hand, jobs awaiting—and something more: the comfort

of zero tuition, which ordinarily retails for about \$120,000.

For the first time in more than two decades, the Root-Tilden-Kern Scholarship Program has been able to give a full three-year ride for select NYU Law students committed to public service careers.

"This is a big deal," said Deborah Ellis,

assistant dean for public interest law. "The cost of tuition keeps going up and up, but the salaries of public interest lawyers don't go up that much."

With starting salaries at large Manhattan firms running about \$150,000 versus \$40,000 to \$50,000 for new hires at legal aid agencies and governmental offices, freedom from what

amounts to a house mortgage is clearly a relief to graduates entering the public interest arena.

Established in 1951 as the Root-Tilden program—named for alumni Elihu Root (1845-1937), statesman and Nobel laureate, and New York Governor Samuel J. Tilden (1814-1886)—the beneficiaries were to be, by policy, unmarried males. The initial purpose was to position NYU Law as a national institution attractive to students who might otherwise gravitate to Ivy League campuses.

In recent years, there has been an upward trend in support for public interest law students at top tier law schools.

Harvard Law School, for instance, offers a tuition-free third year for those committed to public interest law. While not directly underwriting tuition, Ms. Ellis said Yale Law School has perhaps the most comprehensive debt forgiveness program. And Cornell Law School's Public Interest Low Income Protection Plan was recently expanded with a grant from the Sarah Betsy Fuller Social Justice Fund, named for a professor who died in 2004.

The federal government has helped as well. In September 2007, the College Cost Reduction and Access Act, PL 110-84, was signed into law. One of its provisions places a 10-year annual ceiling on loan payments for attorneys at nonprofit organizations or in government service, after which any remaining debt may be forgiven.

Root scholars are expected to meet a "moral obligation" of 10 years' public service law, said Ms. Ellis. No one has ever reneged on the obligation, she said, and a substantial majority of recipients remain in the nonprofit legal sector.

Over time, the privately funded tuition assistance program at NYU Law evolved as a means of incubating public interest attorneys. But earnings on endowment principal did not keep pace with the rising costs of higher education in general and something had to give.

A New Name

Free room and board were the first benefits to fade away, and have not returned. Then the number of scholarships were cut, from an original 20 per year to an occasional low of 10. Tuition grants were likewise reduced, from full-ride to two-thirds in recent years, and as low as half-rate at some points.

Accordingly, John E. Sexton, former dean of the law school and now president of NYU, called on a klatsch of prosperous alumni in 1998 to plan a fundraising drive to bolster the then-named Root-Tilden Scholarship Program.

Among the prosperous was Jerome H. Kern, NYU Law class of 1960, destined to become the program's third name, in recognition of his gift of \$5 million—at first.

"It was my pleasure," said Mr. Kern, chairman of the Colorado-based Symphony Media Systems, a broadband distribution company. "As it turned out, though, it came to \$7.5 million."

This was due, he explained with a laugh, when the \$30 million fundraising target fell short by the very sum he had donated to get the ball rolling—\$5 million.

With reference to Dean Richard Revesz, Mr. Kern said, "Ricky came around and said he'd like to announce at the 50th anniversary reunion program that the [Root-Tilden] endowment was fully funded, but that we'd only reached \$25 million. He was pretty sheepish. He said we were \$5 million short because two other guys on the [alumni committee] were dead. So he asked me and another guy for \$2.5 million each. So we gave it to him."

The Brooklyn-born Mr. Kern was himself a vintage 1957 "Rooter," as the NYU scholarship recipients call themselves.

"Back in those days, we got room and board, too—and a stipend," Mr. Kern recalled. "I think it was about \$75 a month. So it was a very coveted scholarship. It was a tremendous opportunity for me."

The New Rooters

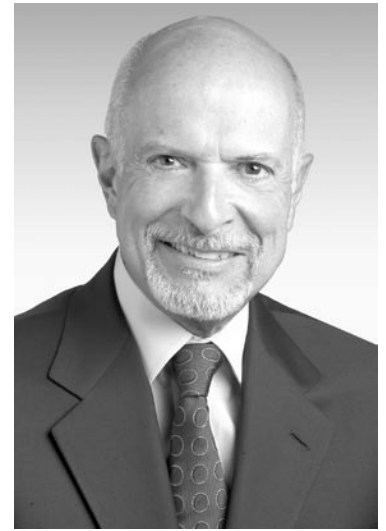
Wednesday's new crop of Rooters includes Alejandro Fernandez, who starts a two-year hitch this fall as an attorney with the Criminal Defender Clinic at Georgetown Law Center in Washington, D.C.; Ryan Downer, who begins this summer as a clerk for Judge Martha Craig Daughtrey of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit in Nashville, Tenn.; and Randi Levine, set to work at Advocates for Children in New York as an Equal Justice Works fellow.

A product of New York City public schools whose mother was an elementary school principal on Staten Island, Ms. Levine, 28, said education is "a ladder that helps children rise out of poverty and cycles of neglect," and that she means to keep such children in class.

To that end, Ms. Levine and two of her fellow Rooters instituted the "Suspension Representation Project" at NYU Law three years ago, with guidance from the Legal Aid Society's Juvenile Rights Division. To date, she said, some 30 law students have counseled public school youth at risk of suspension through 25 administrative hearings before the New York City Department of Education.

Mr. Downer, 25, said his judicial clerkship would help prepare him for the civil legal services career he plans for himself, after which he plans to pursue impact litigation, perhaps at the American Civil Liberties Union.

The day he got word that he had won a Root fellowship, said Mr. Downer, "I was ecstatic. I knew I wanted to do public service law, but it was pretty stressful thinking of a six-figure debt coming out of law school."



ENKI STRATEGIC ADVISORS
Jerome H. Kern

Mr. Fernandez, 25, a philosophy major at Harvard College, said he had been considering Columbia Law School until the Root fellowship made his decision "easy" in opting for NYU Law.

He said he was attracted to criminal law in order to fight a social system that has "decided not to provide for all people to reach some sort of economic and material comfort," producing "people in deepest deprivation resorting to self-help," namely criminals.

Messrs. Downer and Fernandez, as well as Ms. Levine and all the others in this year's crop of Root scholars were interviewed by Mr. Kern during the application process, and eventually approved by him.

Mr. Kern said he doubted that were he an applicant today he could win a scholarship himself.

"I'll tell you exactly why," he said. "We had this one young woman with a 4.0 average, LSATs in the 98th percentile and a letter from her English professor that said in his 25 years of teaching she was the best student he'd ever had. So guess what? We ranked her fourth."

Mr. Kern added, "What these young people have already done, even before their careers have started, is remarkable. I am very, very proud of them. If Ricky [Revesz] or John [Sexton] had come to me and said, 'We'll name a building after you,' I wouldn't have any interest. But this—an ability to help young, dedicated people—is my legacy."

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