

Law students do public good

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The University of Victoria chapter of Pro Bono Students Canada feels is upholding a long-standing tradition within the legal profession.

The Latin term "pro bono publico" means "for the public good" and refers to work done on behalf of the public for little or no remuneration.

The UVic program, in existence for two years, provides assistance to non-profit and community-based organizations by arranging for small groups of law students to work closely with local lawyers who are already involved in pro bono activities.

The students aren't permitted to provide legal advice to those groups until they've been called to the bar and have become lawyers themselves, but they can do research for them and disseminate existing legal information under the supervision of the lawyer to which they've been assigned.

The UVic chapter, which consists of more than 80 law students, held a celebration lunch Thursday to recognize the work of its members over the past year and acknowledge the contributions that the organization has made to maintain the time-honoured practice in Greater Victoria.

"One of our main goals is fostering a pro bono ethic within the community of law students, such that it will continue in their careers when they become lawyers," said student co-ordinator Melinda Skeels.

Skeels added that most of the law students she's dealt with on the Gordon Head campus wanted to get into the legal profession because they felt compelled "to make a difference in the world."

Offering to provide pro bono services once they become lawyers is just one way to do that.

"It's a chance for them to give back to the community and get in touch with that initial impulse that brought them to law school," Skeels said.

Over the past year, the UVic chapter has provided hands-on assistance to 18 community groups.

They include the Counselling Association of B.C., the Western Canada Society to Access Justice, the Victoria Crystal Meth Task Force, The Land Conservancy of B.C., the Inter-Cultural Association, the Victoria Women's Transition House, the Canadian Peacekeeping Veterans Association and the Vancouver Island Human Rights Coalition.

The demands of a modern law practice (where an emphasis is placed on accumulating "billable hours") can sometimes put pressure on a lawyer's pledge to participate in pro bono work. But Skeels says it's important for the next generation of lawyers to make those commitments.

Judging by what she's seen and heard within UVic's faculty of law, she's optimistic that her classmates will strive to

improve Canada's justice system by accepting pro bono cases.

"If the enthusiasm I see amongst my classmates is any indication, I think very much so," she said. "With the cuts that we're seeing to legal aid (services), it's falling more and more on the shoulders of individual lawyers to step up and do what they can."

The scheduled keynote speaker at Thursday's event was well-known lawyer Joseph Arvay, Q.C.

He has taken on many pro bono assignments over the past two decades, in addition to his involvement in some of the country's most influential constitutional law, human rights and aboriginal claim cases.

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