

**A**lmost everyone knows that medical students complete residencies and internships before they rightfully can be called doctors, and aspiring teachers fulfill a practicum before being assigned their own classrooms. But where do tomorrow's lawyers gain their real-world experience?

At the University of Oklahoma, they fall under the attentive guidance of law professor Keith Bystrom.

Bystrom's concern, as director of clinical legal education at the OU College of Law, is that new lawyers hanging fresh OU diplomas on their office walls also have had the practical experience they cannot gain from books.

"It's very important for law students to have a component of their education that introduces them to the basic lawyering skills they need to be successful in the legal profession," says Bystrom, adding that many law schools across the nation do not offer their students opportunities for practical experience.

Certainly, few institutions offer nearly a half dozen different programs to expose students to a variety of legal situations. At OU, however, students can take advantage of a civil—or legal aid—law clinic, a criminal defense clinic, a prisoners' rights clinic, an "externship" clinic, a judicial law clinic and an environmental externship semester in Washington, D.C.

"The major goals of the program are to introduce students to the professional skills they'll need once they join the legal profession. It provides them opportunities to develop their skills and get confidence in what they're doing while under the supervision of a practicing attorney," Bystrom says.

In the civil clinic, supervising attorneys guide law students as they try to assist low-income people in Cleveland and McClain counties with issues ranging from divorce to the writing of wills. Students also act as go-betweens for their clients and the Social Security Administration, often

law students and supervising attorneys represent low-income people in the Norman Municipal Court.

"Never before had there been any legal assistance for poor people in the municipal court," Bystrom says. "The students also monitor the county jail so that prisoners get represented quickly. Previously, some people stayed in jail as long as one month without a hearing.

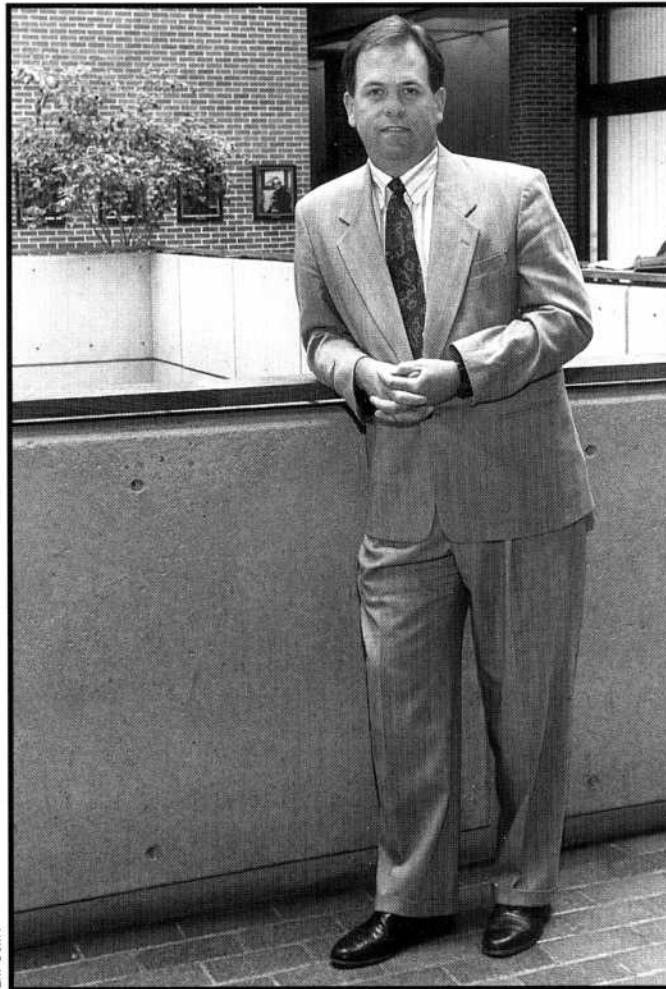
"The criminal defense students come out with a better understanding of how the system works, and they have been instrumental in trying to help the criminal justice system work better."

In the prisoners' rights clinic, students gain experience working with residents of the El Reno Federal Correctional Institution on such matters as post conviction appeals and family legal problems. Additionally, the students gain a clearer understanding of how to cope with clients who sometimes can be less than cooperative.

"The program is a good introduction for a student to learn how to deal with a real client. Many clients are opinionated, and some can be hard to deal with. The counseling skills the students learn are transferable to any situation," Bystrom says.

More traditional programs also offered by OU are an externship clinic, which pairs law students with supervising attorneys in such settings as district attorney offices and government offices, and the judicial clinic, which allows students to work in the offices of Oklahoma judges.

"I hope that when they leave law school, my students will have the confidence to represent a client whether they're at a large or small firm. We try to give our students the skill of continuing to learn how to be better



Gil Jain

*Keith Bystrom, recipient of the 1995 Merrick Foundation Teaching Award, oversees a clinical legal education program that provides real-world experience while performing a public service for those who cannot afford representation.*

with successful results.

"In the past four years, we've obtained more than \$100,000 in back-benefits for people who are disabled and originally were turned down by Social Security," Bystrom reports proudly.

At the criminal defense clinic located in a downtown Norman office,

lawyers throughout their careers," Bystrom says.

Bystrom and his students are understandably proud of the work they accomplish through the clinical legal education program. One example of that work is the recent victory of third-year law student Gail Puckett, of Oklahoma City, an intern in the OU civil law clinic for three semesters.

Puckett's client was a rural Pontotoc County man who never had recovered from head injuries sustained in an auto accident in the 1970s. The Social Security Administration denied the man benefits, maintaining that he chose not to work.

"The community where he lived was helping the gentleman—basically, he couldn't work and had no money," Puckett explains. "He was barely eking by."

A previous legal intern appealed the matter and persuaded the administrative law judge to provide the client with a physical and mental evaluation. Doctors diagnosed the man with organic brain syndrome, a mental illness that is physiologically based. Because of his illness, Puckett's client has virtually no short-term memory and loses track of conversations within five minutes. He has difficulty adding or subtracting and sitting still for even short periods of time and has physically aged far beyond his 44 years.

The hearing allowed Puckett to produce medical evidence that proved her client was eligible for benefits under Social Security Administration guidelines and gave him the opportunity to appear personally before Social Security representatives and a judge.

"Everyone could see that he was not going to be able to handle even the lightest, most sedentary job," Puckett says.

A little more than a month ago, her client began receiving Social Security benefits.

"We're really tickled. He is going to be able to live without the charity of the whole community," says Puckett, who currently is working on behalf of a mentally ill woman who fell through the cracks of the state mental health system. "The clinic is a great learning experience, and it does help people

who might not have an opportunity to seek legal counsel elsewhere. That man we helped had nowhere else to turn.

"Working for the clinic has impacted me a lot, even in the kind of law I want to practice." Puckett, a non-traditional student at age 43 and mother of OU freshman Chad Puckett, hopes to enter a law practice that will allow her to champion the elderly or children and families.

"I really think the clinical programs ought to be mandatory," she insists. "I've learned as much—maybe even more—from the clinic as through my law classes, because you apply the law. It's a big part of the learning process."

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Bystrom also believes strongly in the program's value to the lawyer-in-training.

"It's impossible to simulate all the potential problems that can occur in real cases," he contends. "You can talk about ethics and responsibility all you want, but until you get a client who is asking you to do something unethical or face a question of professional responsibility, it's just a problem in a book. It doesn't hit home—you don't know how you're going to react. Students in our clinical program resolve these dilemmas under the watchful eye of a trained supervisor and then are prepared to better handle similar situations when they are on their own.

"One of our goals also is to instill in our students a sense of the public service obligation in the legal profession." As an example, Bystrom detailed the work of OU students who have volunteered for a program sponsored by Le-

gal Aid of Western Oklahoma, which offers legal services to those who otherwise cannot afford them.

These cases have dealt with legal problems associated with HIV and AIDS. In February, an OU student represented an AIDS patient who was refused his Social Security and Medicare benefits.

"That person now has his benefits," Bystrom stresses.

Bystrom knows more than a little about public service. The former United Way of Norman president has been active in a number of civic projects, including the Women's Resource Center, Leadership Norman and the Cleveland County Bar Association. His efforts have earned him such honors as the Norman Rotary Club Four-Way Test Award for dedication and service to the community.

A graduate of the University of Nebraska and Georgetown University Law School, Bystrom was working as a public defender in his home state when he met a young newspaper reporter named Dianne Gabrukiewicz. The two married and came to OU in 1979.

"We thought, 'Well, we'll try this and see if we like it for four or five years,'" Keith remembers. "Obviously we've enjoyed Norman very much."

Sixteen years later, Dianne is associate provost of the OU Norman campus, and Keith, who has held nearly every leadership post in the College of Law, helps shape the next generation of lawyers.

Although OU law graduates are recognized at their own separate commencement ceremony, Keith was front and center at the May 13 commencement ceremony for the rest of the Norman campus, when Dianne received a doctoral degree in communication.

Together, the OU law professor and the associate provost have firmly established their lives on Sooner soil. And inadvertently they have fulfilled Keith's mother's prophecy made when the couple left Nebraska in 1979, years before the Bystroms' children—Christopher and Elizabeth—were born.

"My mom was concerned that my kids would be Sooners," Keith Bystrom says with a smile.

—Anne Barajas