

Mentoring at 515 Rusk

Federal Judges Make Time to Mentor Young Attorneys

By ANNA ARCHER

Federal judges have extremely busy and diverse dockets and could easily say “I am too busy” or “I am too important” to mentor students and young lawyers. But that is not the attitude of the federal judges at the Bob Casey Federal Courthouse at 515 Rusk. On a typical summer day, visitors to the courthouse will find it bustling with student interns who are eager to learn more about the law, and the interns will encounter numerous federal judges who are more than happy to play a role in the interns’ professional development.

Most of the judges at 515 Rusk have one or more interns in the summer who spend six weeks in the judges’ chambers. The interns generally spend their time observing court proceedings and performing legal research and writing for the judges. However, the internship programs are catered to the specific judge’s chambers, so each judge’s program is different. Despite the differences, all of the interns who are fortunate to intern at 515 Rusk have the opportunity to work directly with a federal judge and engage in an informal mentoring relationship with that judge. Without exception, the judges take this role seriously.

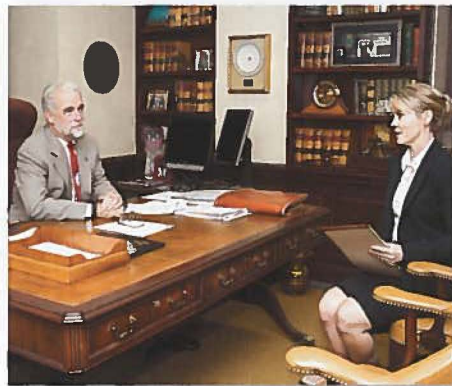
One judge who has a particularly strong internship program is the Honorable Jeff Bohm, a United States Bankruptcy Judge. Judge Bohm typically has ten to fifteen interns each summer, and his interns are always very excited about how much they learn while working in his chambers. Bernardo Sada-Paz, who interned for Judge Bohm during the first half of the summer this year, says:

“Few mentors have made an impact on me during my career as much as Judge Bohm was able to do in six short weeks. Beyond teaching us the ins and outs of bankruptcy law, Judge Bohm truly wants his interns to succeed in the practice of law. I benefited greatly from the amount of time he dedicated to us on a daily basis as well as from the excellent practical advice that he provided for our future legal careers.”

Inge Pasman who interned for Judge Bohm during the second half of the summer, notes that Judge Bohm is always willing to help each intern further his or her legal career and provides education about the business side of law practice.

According to Emily Buchanan, a former law clerk at the U.S. District Court, Judge Bohm views almost anything as a teachable moment. And teaching for him is an interactive process, usually involving a white board and all the interns and clerks. Asking questions is encouraged, and interns understand and appreciate that. Buchanan notes that Judge Bohm mentors his interns on law as a career and a profession and that his interns learn far more than bankruptcy. Judge Bohm provides insight about firms, teaching, and other options they may have after earning their law degrees. He actually gets to know his interns and talks with them about their individual goals. Judge Bohm modestly states that he “does the best [he] can with his interns.”

Some of the judges at 515 Rusk extend their mentoring of students beyond the interns who work in their chambers. For instance, several of the judges take time to sit down



U.S. District Judge Gray Miller talks with University of Houston Law Center intern Donna McIntosh. Photo by Elena Hawthorne, UHLC.

and talk with all of the interns in the building during weekly “Brown Bag Lunches.” During these lunches, interns learn about the day-to-day challenges faced by the different types of judges in the building—bankruptcy, magistrates, district court, and appellate—and also become privy to coveted practice tips from esteemed federal judges. For instance, during the bankruptcy Brown Bag Lunch, the interns learned that it is best not to advise the bankruptcy court that you do not “normally” practice bankruptcy law because this admission signals that the attorney is not sufficiently prepared for the proceeding.

Even judges who do not have formal summer internship programs find ways to mentor the interns who flood the building during the summer months. For instance, the Honorable Keith Ellison, a United States District Court Judge, mentors summer interns via informal meetings in his chambers following interesting proceedings the interns have observed in his courtroom. He gives great tips about what internships and jobs will be beneficial for certain career paths, and he sometimes discusses challenges that he has faced as a federal judge.

Judge Ellison’s mentoring does not stop with law-school interns. He also mentors at least one high school student each year through the EMERGE program, and encourages his current and former law clerks to do the same. The EMERGE program’s mission is “to develop high-achieving students from underserved communities to be the next generation of leaders by preparing them to apply, attend, and graduate from the nation’s top colleges and universities.”¹

This year, Judge Ellison participated in the “Take a Fellow to Work” program through EMERGE. Three local students had the opportunity to shadow Judge Ellison for a day. In addition to observing Judge Ellison’s regular docket, students could sit down with Judge Ellison and some other well-known lawyers to discuss the legal profession. One of the students, Katherine Umana, confirmed during this conversation that she wants to be a lawyer. She also learned, through talking with Judge Ellison after observing several criminal sentencings that, “while earning a law degree would be challenging, in the end it [would] be worth it, because [she] could have the opportunity to use [her] conscience to impact the life of a person.”²

The judges at 515 Rusk understand all too well that as lawyers and judges they can impact people’s lives, and one of the ways the judges do this in a tangible and lasting way is through mentoring, whether formal or informal. The students who have received this mentoring start the practice of law ahead of the curve because they have already gained insight from a lawyer at the top of his or her field. The lawyers and litigants in the Houston area all benefit from having such able jurists who are willing to spend a little extra time to help students who may, in the future, practice in Houston courts learn how to be better lawyers. 

Anna Archer graduated from the University of Houston Law Center in 2006 and works as a career law clerk for the Honorable Gray H.

Miller. She interned for the Honorable David Hittner during the summer of 2004.

Endnotes

1. Emerge, About Us, <http://www.emergefellowship.org/#!ourmission/clf4>.
2. See Emerge, Blog, <http://www.emergefellowship.org/#!Take-A-Fellow-to-Work-US-District-Judge/c240y/56face310cf2e3ce9bb2983b>.

Mentoring through Houston Volunteer Lawyers

Making Justice Happen

By CJ CHAMBERS and RAYMOND L. PANNETON

Founded in 1981 by the Houston Bar Association, Houston Volunteer Lawyers (HVL) provides free legal assistance to thousands of indigent Houstonians each year. As a non-profit service of the Houston Bar Association, HVL seeks to fill the gap in the civil and family justice systems by connecting eligible low-income citizens to qualified, volunteer attorneys. HVL receives over 30,000 requests for legal assistance a year, in which HBA volunteer lawyers provide over \$4,000,000.00 in free legal services.

Staying true to their mission, HVL represents clients in civil matters, such as family law, guardianships, estates, probate, tax disputes, landlord-tenant disputes, home ownership, and consumer issues to name a few.

As inquiries come into HVL, each case is carefully screened, the client is evaluated for eligibility, and ultimately matched with a qualified attorney volunteer. Many times, the volunteer attorney is assigned a case outside their practice area and will need assistance from an experienced lawyer. This is where HVL steps in. HVL has staff attorneys, as well as several volunteer attorney mentors, experienced in the same areas of practice as cases assigned to volunteer attorneys. Assistance from an HVL attorney-mentor may be in the form of providing a necessary form or documentation to attending a hearing with the volunteer attorney. Mentors



Peter Bennett, right, accepts an award for outstanding service to HVL from 2015 Houston Bar Foundation chair William R. Buck.