

Student association breaks new ground at UDM

BY DAVID C. KOELSCH

Two months ago, several enterprising law students at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law formed a new student organization. This new student organization is unique because, unlike most other student organizations, it is not yet a chapter of a larger national or regional organization. The Immigration Law Students Association (ILSA) is the only student-led organization in Michigan – and one of only three in the U.S. – dedicated to the promotion of student interest in immigration law. ILSA is a pioneer in the relatively young field of immigration law and reflects UDM's role in educating the growing numbers of new attorneys practicing immigration law.

A core group of three law students, Karen Caird, Megan Begley and Benjamin Bartlett, met in September 2006 to talk about their future careers in the law and brainstorm ways in which they could launch their careers as immigration attorneys. Out of that informal brainstorming session, ILSA was born. Karen Caird, the president of ILSA, notes that "ILSA was a natural fit for UDM, with Detroit being a border town and the opportunities offered through the Immigration Law Clinic." Megan Begley explains the genesis of ILSA: "As students approaching graduation, we wanted to create a group that could assist other students in learning more about this particular field as well as creating a sort of stepping stone to begin practice in immigration law." In just two months, 37 students have joined ILSA and ILSA hosted a highly successful immigration law seminar at UDM on November 10, 2006, that attracted more than 100 immigration attorneys from across Michigan. ILSA has a number of activities planned for the rest of the academic year that includes fundraisers, bringing prominent speakers to UDM, and

developing a student-attorney mentoring program.

ILSA is riding a wave of interest in immigration law. There is a "perfect storm" building interest in immigration law: the U.S. is experiencing the highest level of immigration in U.S. history, the immigration agencies were recently-reorganized in the biggest bureaucratic shuffle in U.S. history, and – with Democrats now in control of the House and Senate – prospects for comprehensive immigration reform are better than they have been for many years. As testament to the heightened interest in immigration law, the membership of the Michigan chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA) has nearly doubled in the past five years to over 275 active members.

As members of ILSA, UDM students are also student members of AILA, which has over 10,000 members nationwide. Due to its rapid growth over the past few years, AILA has focussed more on expanding services to members, than on reaching out to law students interested in immigration law. ILSA and AILA are about to change that relationship. AILA is very interested in developing student chapters of AILA, rather than the current system of individual student members of AILA. When he was in Detroit for the recent immigration law seminar, Andrew Prazuch, the executive director of AILA, met with ILSA and was impressed by their work and energy: "Students are the future of immigration law – we need their ideas, their commitment to the law and their clients – and ILSA is very much a test-case of how AILA would like to develop student chapters across the country."

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