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The Take in South Jersey | Students put law into motion

By Terry Bitman
Inquirer Staff Writer

Third-year law students Mark McNally and Louis Ludwig were the first fledgling attorneys out of the chute from Rutgers-Camden's new Children's Justice Clinic, appearing in court on behalf of a 16-year-old charged with taking a weapon to school.

The program, in a city where the juvenile crime rate soars, aims to represent kids who run afoul of the law and to help get them on the right path so they don't become career criminals.

It's modeled after a program at Northwestern University. There also is one at Georgetown. But there is nothing like it at any of the law schools in Philadelphia or New York.

After they returned from a brief court hearing, McNally, of Audubon, and Ludwig, of Norfolk, Va., focused not on the legal system, but on the home-schooling their client was getting while he awaited disposition of his case.

"We are not sure he is getting the best home-schooling available," Ludwig said.

The clinic's goal is threefold, said Sandra Simkins, codirector of the program and a former Philadelphia public defender: Provide learning experiences for the third-year law students, create a national model for a law school's juvenile justice program, and help troubled juveniles with a range of needs, including education, health and housing.

"This is a win-win situation," Simkins said.

And Camden County kids sure do need a win.

While Camden County accounts for only 6.5 percent of New Jersey's juvenile population, Simkins said, a staggering one-third of those in the juvenile justice system are from the county. Most are from Camden.

"Our dedication to this program has to be a help," she said. "And the kids are going to get great representation from our students."

The impetus behind the clinic is Law School dean Rayman Solomon, who was involved in the Northwestern program. The clinic secured a \$75,000 grant from the university to start.

A consequence of its work might be to lessen the load of the overburdened Public Defender's Office. The Rutgers clinic is looking for case referrals from the defender's office and the courts.

The 16 student lawyers work in pairs, and each pair will handle two cases per semester. So far, about five cases have been referred to the clinic, which handles them for free.

"We basically get to pick and choose the cases we want," said J.C. Lore, the program's other codirector and a former public defender in Chicago.

The emphasis will be on city children charged with crimes, Lore said. "They're the most vulnerable kids," he said.

"An opportunity to be involved with something like this didn't exist when I was in law school," said Simkins, a Rutgers Law School graduate. "Now I have a dream job. I know



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we can help."

For more information or to refer a case, contact the Children's Justice Clinic at 856-225-2363.

Taxing thought

News item: The governor of New Jersey called for the merger of small school districts and municipalities as a way of consolidating services, saving money, and thus reducing the highest property taxes in the nation.

I wrote that story, including comment from local legislators who were afraid of a revolt among their constituents if they supported such heresy. I also talked to ordinary people who were conflicted between wanting their taxes to go no higher and keeping the schools their children attended autonomous and top-notch - one of the reasons they had moved to their communities.

The governor with the crazy idea was Camden County's own Bill Cahill. The year was 1972. Cahill also proposed a state income tax to lessen property taxes. The income tax came to be in the next administration, as Cahill was denied renomination by Republicans - the only incumbent New Jersey governor to lose a primary.

As for the consolidation of schools and towns, well, as they say, some things just never change.

If you see something that interests you about life in South Jersey send an e-mail to thetake@phillynews.com or call 856-779-3869. Read recent columns at <http://go.philly.com/terrybitman>.

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