Law Fellows : 20 Years of Opening Doors

Leana Taing ’14 used her UCLA School of Law education to close a circle that had opened half a world away, before she was born. One summer as she worked toward her J.D., Taing — a Stockton native raised by immigrants who had fled the murderous regime of Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge — served an internship at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, helping to prosecute war crimes.

It was, she says, an unforgettable experience — one that she owes to the UCLA Law Fellows Program. The program, which just celebrated its 20th year, demystifies law school and gives aspiring lawyers the tools to succeed in law. So far, more than 1,600 undergraduate students from a variety of schools have participated; about 600 fellows have gone on to law schools all over the country, including 159 at UCLA Law. Fellows are overwhelmingly from backgrounds that are underrepresented in the legal profession.

“Without Law Fellows, I would not be where I am today,” says Taing, who now represents indigent parents in Los Angeles’ Edmund D. Edelman Children’s Court.

Each spring, about 100 undergraduates come to UCLA Law for the program. They take in lectures by UCLA Law faculty, are paired with current law students who mentor them, and connect with Law Fellows alumni who have gone on to successful careers at top firms, in public service or in government. Admission is competitive but free of charge. Fellows who complete the coursework receive a free LSAT prep course.

Leo Trujillo-Cox, who earned his J.D. from UCLA Law in 1997, runs the program. After Proposition 209 effectively ended affirmative action in California two years earlier, there was a severe drop-off in minority applicants to law schools. Trujillo-Cox was tapped by then-dean Susan Westerberg Prager to help bolster diversity at a time when non-white applicants with competitive GPAs and LSAT scores were few and rival institutions were unburdened by restrictive state laws.

“My thought was: Why fight over a small pie when we can expand it?” says Trujillo-Cox, who is the school’s Executive Director of Academic Outreach & Development.

The trailblazing initiative has been a model for efforts at other colleges and has garnered widespread support from the non-profit AccessLex; the California Bar Foundation, which recently renewed its annual commitment to back a Law Fellows extension effort for students from California’s Central Valley at UC Merced; and the University of California Office of the President, which is funding three years of LSAT tutoring and
counseling to undocumented undergrads. Law Fellows has also attracted financial support to help former foster children.

‘THIS IS YOU IN A COUPLE OF YEARS’
Early on a Saturday in January 2017, a fresh group of 95 law fellows met at UCLA Law for the first of their semester-long Saturday Academies. Some had made their way from San Diego, Berkeley or New York. At least one crashed on a couch at a sorority house.

Trujillo-Cox welcomed them into the “Law Fellows family” and said that they would know each other for the rest of their personal and professional lives. He previewed the day’s sample lectures from UCLA Law professors and a panel of former fellows who spoke about their paths to becoming successful lawyers.

“This is you in a couple of years,” Trujillo-Cox told the fresh fellows.

Like Taing, many are first-generation citizens or residents, and many are the first in their families to attend four-year universities.

For Paola Dela Cruz, then a senior at UC Santa Barbara, this first taste of legal education had her fully charged.

“Sitting in the classroom where law students learn, I literally felt the blood rushing through my veins,” she said. “It became so much more real. Like, it’s possible: I’m doing it. We’re all doing it.”

Read about our amazing alumni, students, and faculty in the Fall 2017 edition of UCLA Law Magazine.