



SINCE 2012, IT HAS OPERATED OUT OF A FORMER FIREHOUSE AT 585 LARNED NOW NAMED THE GEORGE J. ASHER LAW CLINIC CENTER.

'NOT A CAREER, BUT A VOCATION'

LAW'S CLINIC PROGRAM CELEBRATES
60 YEARS OF JUSTICE

BY RON BERNAS

In the fall of 1965, University of Detroit's Law School opened its Urban Law Clinic. No one can say for sure whether it was the first program of its kind in the country, but it was certainly among the first.

Over the next six decades, the idea grew to become a signature of the Detroit Mercy Law experience. Fourteen clinics, each specializing in different areas, allow students to truly understand what the legal profession is truly about. Participating in the clinical program is a requirement of all law students

For Miguel Brikho '24, law school seemed like a lot of reading and memorizing — until he participated in the traveling Expungement Clinic, where he worked to help people who met the criteria of a new law to remove felony convictions from their records.

"The clinic program was what made me feel that the law was the right choice for me," Brikho said. "It's where I understood that the law could be not just a career but a vocation."

Mission driven

Right from the start, the idea of the clinic was driven by the University's mission.

The Urban Law Clinic, as it was called originally, opened in 1965 as a walk-in law firm in Detroit and was said to

SERVING A WIDE ARRAY OF CLIENTS

Over 60 years, Detroit Mercy's Law Clinic program has grown with the needs and interests of the community and the School of Law. Here are the 14 clinics offered today.

Arts & Entertainment Law Clinic provides pro bono legal services to creatives including filing copyright registrations, commenting and advising on legal agreements and copyright issues. **Conviction Integrity Clinic** works in partnership with the Wayne and Oakland County Prosecutors Offices Conviction Integrity Units to learn practical aspects of prosecution and review petitions for relief. **Criminal Trial Clinic** offers students the opportunity to act as court-appointed counsel under attorney supervision representing misdemeanor defendants. **Environmental Law Clinic** participants work to affect Canadian and U.S. regulatory policy on issues related to pollution, environmental justice and transportation. **The Family Law Clinic** represents individuals in matters of family law. Students in the **Federal Pro Se Legal Assistance Clinic** provide support and guidance to hundreds of non-prisoner litigants each year who represent themselves in court without an attorney. **The Housing Law Clinic** helps keep Detroit families in their homes by preventing and challenging illegal property tax foreclosures. Students in the **Immigration Law Clinic** represent immigrants seeking a variety of relief and benefits including asylum, family sponsorship and more. **International Intellectual Property Clinic - Patent Law** operates as a U.S. Patent and Trademark certified clinic and works with inventors with patent-related issues. **Juvenile Appellate Clinic** students represent appeals from children to the Michigan Court of Appeals from trial court abuse and neglect proceedings. **State Appellate Defender Office (SADO) Clinic** students work on sentencing advocacy with lawyers and clients from SADO toward positive sentencing outcomes. The **Trademark and Entrepreneurial Law Clinic** operates as a U.S. Patent and Trademark certified clinic where students assist entrepreneurs in filing trademark applications and assist clients in navigating legal issues involved in starting a business. The **Unemployment and Workers Rights Clinic** will help clients understand their rights under the law as they deal with employment-related legal issues. Students participating in the **Veterans Law Clinic** represent military veterans and their families in disability cases and related matters.

Since 2019, Detroit Mercy has taken its clinical program on the road with the **Traveling Expungement Clinic**, helping those who meet the criteria outlined by the Michigan Legislature remove felonies from their records.

be the first such storefront clinic in in Detroit. Funded by a \$250,000 grant from President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty program, it was a place where disenfranchised and economically disadvantaged people could go for representation when fighting for their rights.

In a 1966 interview, then Clinic Director Norman Miller told the campus newspaper *Varsity News* that the goal of the clinic was to "reconcile the tremendous psychological gap between the poor and the law. Before, they lacked someone to represent them; now, they have the same opportunities to all the benefits of the law."

Also important was that it be a training ground for law students. Its guiding principles from the start were that it be used for curriculum development, clinical training, community education and to help provide research into legal problems, especially among the urban poor.

Just two years later, the clinic was well positioned to address the needs of nearly 1,000 people who were detained during and after the uprising in Detroit. Clinic students — who were given the power to represent indigent clients by acting as co-counsel with supervising attorneys by a Michigan Court Rule — were responsible for the dismissal of more than 500 cases stemming from the 1967 racial unrest.

That same year, the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan awarded its Bill of Rights Award to the Urban Law Clinic for its "outstanding contributions in the field of law and justice." It was the first of many awards, both statewide and nationally, the clinic program has received over the years.

The clinic expanded to other urban areas and courts outside the city of Detroit and offered further clinics as needs emerged. In the early 2000s, it also boasted three Mobile Law Offices — retrofitted RVs — serving hundreds of clients who might not otherwise have been able to get to a traditional law office.

By 2008, clinic participation had become a requirement for graduation.

Bigger and stronger

Today, 14 separate clinics allow students many choices in how to meet that graduation requirement. Many alumni inspired by the clinic work and its outcomes over the past 60 years remain involved as faculty and in other ways.

Today's clinical program is overseen by Assistant Dean of Experiential Education Rebecca Simkins Nowak. She is the clinic's biggest booster.

"We have a powerhouse clinical program," she said. "We really do."

Students take their clinic usually in their second or third year by listing their choices among the options, and it can be competitive.

In recent years, the Pro Se Clinic has become what Nowak calls the "crown jewel." Through this clinic, students work with indigent and low-income non-prisoner litigants who have chosen to represent themselves before the court. Students educate these litigants about the court process, help them complete forms, aid in discovery and research at several

stages of the proceedings.

The result, Nowak says, is a better experience and, often, outcome with the court, which also saves money because there are fewer delays in the process.

The clinic is a partnership with the Eastern District of Michigan, which saw the need and reached out. That is also how the Housing Law Clinic came about.

"A nonprofit dealing with housing issues came to us saying 'we need help,'" she said.

'I love what I do'

Timothy K. Kroninger '85 is an adjunct professor and an intellectual property attorney and partner with the Detroit office of Varum LLP. With his son Timothy D. Kroninger, he runs the Trademark and Entrepreneurial Law Clinic.

He said he helped create the clinic because "University of Detroit Law put me on a great path, and I wanted to give back to the University in a different way."

Each fall and winter semester, eight to 10 students work with entrepreneurs under the guidance of the father-son team navigating the legal issues involved in starting a business.

It often starts with determining whether the clients' ideas and products or company can be trademarked. That involves a lot of research on the part of the students. There are applications, both state and federal, that must be filled out properly to ensure the trademark will stand.

Clients find the clinic in a variety of ways — some call the School of Law looking for advice, sometimes there are referrals and, in some instances, they are potential clients of Varum who Kroninger feels would be better served by the clinic students.

"The students help these people form a company and they feel so good about that," Kroninger said.

The work is time consuming and generally can't be completed by the end of the semester, but Kroninger sees it all through. All the work is done pro bono, and he or his son ensure students' work is accurate and professional.

But what makes this one of the more popular clinics, Kroninger said, is the added value he and his son offer.

"We teach them the tips of being a lawyer," he said, from how to dress, how to understand the pecking order at a law firm and, most importantly, how to work with clients. "We work to put them in a good position to be a better attorney by preparing them on how to start the practice of law."

Improving lives

Since 2019, Nowak has been leading a Traveling Expungement Clinic to rural areas of northern Michigan to help people petition to have felonies removed from their records so they can move forward from past mistakes into a new life.

Hon. Michelle Rick '91 is a Michigan Court of Appeals judge and an adjunct professor at UDM Law who has been with this clinic from the start. She says working with this clinic was inspired by her work at the Urban Law Clinic as a student.

"It was the only clinic at the time, and I would say it lit the fire in my belly," she said. "Social justice has been the predominate theme of the clinics and the Expungement Clinic is right in line

with that."

People with criminal records often have trouble getting jobs, finding housing, receiving public assistance or student loans, traveling internationally or volunteering in their child's class.

"These are people in rural Michigan who can't even go deer hunting because they can't carry a firearm," Rick said. "These are people who made a mistake many years ago and have not had further trouble with the law. We help them determine whether they are eligible and if they are, we help them through the process. It changes lives."

"Students in this clinic get a great education in working with clients, interviewing, document review, pleading preparation, evidence preparation and so many things," Nowak said.

Few people took advantage of the clinic its first year, but more recently there are lines out the door of people seeking help.

"They know who we are now, and know that we want to help them," Nowak added.

Because expungement can be a lengthy process, students often aren't able to see the final hearing where their hard work comes to fruition.

"There are usually a lot of tears, from the clients, their families, me, even the judge," Nowak said. "But this is why we do this, to change lives."

Carol Jackson, a member and magistrate of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Mount Pleasant, Mich., has seen firsthand the positive effects of expungement.

She says the clinic has lasting impacts that include reducing recidivism, breaks down barriers that enable people to establish affordable housing and employment opportunities.

"We also personally witnessed a significant improvement on the overall health and well-being by dissolving shame, stigma and the effects of the social impact for each individual, which provides a productive citizen through positive reintegration into our communities," Jackson said.

"That is attributable to Detroit Mercy's commitment to serving the underserved so these people can return to the community," Rick added. "We see the value of that individual. It's not about big numbers, it's about helping human beings."

Looking ahead

Detroit Mercy Law Dean Nick Schroeck said the clinic program demonstrates his School's commitment to student learning. He should know — he was, at one point, the director of clinics.

"Working in a clinic does make the law real," he added. "People often learn best by doing, and what we do through the clinics is important to clients and their families."

And it's at the core of who Detroit Mercy Law is.

"This work speaks to our students and our social justice mission," he said. "It is practical experience, and it means thousands of hours in service to the community. That is our mission as a school of law. It's important to celebrate it."

Detroit Mercy Law will celebrate 60 years of clinical with a celebration from 5-7 p.m. on Thursday, June 12, in the Atrium of the School of Law's Riverfront Campus. For more information, visit www.law.udmercy.edu.