



*Maddy Rogers, Jordan Blair, Nickolas Templin,  
Leah Bockover, Kaitlin Marsh, and Jonathan Kyte.*

# CONQUERING MOUNTAINS ON WINTER BREAK

The students packed warm gear for January's winter break trip ready to tackle mountains, the man-made variety that have become obstacles for the homeless desperately seeking shelter.

Six students, members of the Equal Justice Works student organization at Washburn Law, devoted their January winter break to helping strangers, specifically the homeless of Washington, D.C. For nearly a week they scoured areas of the District to ensure homeless families and individuals understood their right to life-saving hypothermia shelter on bitterly cold days.

Jordan Blair, Leah Bockover, Jonathan Kyte, Kaitlin Marsh, Madeline "Maddy" Rogers, and Nick Templin worked with staff at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless.

The students were divided into groups to canvass locations, collect information on shelter availability, and inform citizens of their rights under D.C. law. Recent redevelopment and a housing boom in blighted areas have impacted the availability of affordable housing, leaving the disenfranchised with few options. In addition to the mounting crisis, one of the local shelters had recently closed, creating even more demand for lodging.

"Shortly before we arrived, D.C. closed a local men's shelter, forcing all men in the area to a shelter called Hermano Pedro," Rogers said. "Here, we made sure that these men knew their rights, as well as observed racial tensions that had been reported due to the previous shelter's closing."

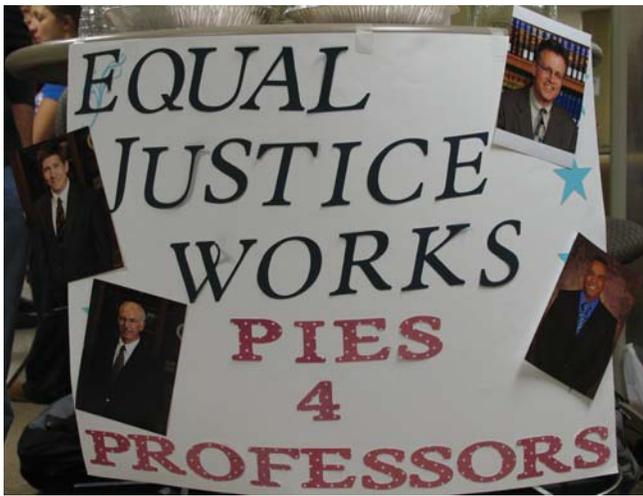
At the Virginia Williams Family Resource Center in D.C., the central intake site for homeless families in the District, the students encountered people with young children seeking shelter for the day or inquiring about

future shelter needs. "We stood outside the family resource center, recorded their names and passed on the information to the legal clinic to try to find them shelter," Templin said.

"The families that we were seeing in need of housing assistance were young, healthy, and educated," said Kyte. "These were not the type of people that are stereotypically thought of as 'homeless.'"

With the District's housing boom came the desire to convert apartments to expensive condominiums, motivating landlords to vacate rental apartments by making conditions intolerable for the residents. "Slumlords let their buildings run down so they don't have to evict occupants. Most unfortunate is that a majority of the time tenants don't understand their rights," Templin explained. The students completed a document review to update a preservation catalog of these at-risk properties. The catalog lists affordable housing developments in the District and enables early identification of projects that are at risk of leaving the affordable housing inventory.

For more than 20 years, Equal Justice Works, which is headquartered in Washington D.C., has collaborated with top law schools to provide effective representation to vulnerable populations throughout the country. Washburn Law has partnered with the national organization for several years, helping to sponsor annual trips for its students to areas of the country where there is a need for legal volunteers.



In previous years Washburn Law students have assisted in New Orleans' relief efforts after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the region. The student organization also has tackled local community projects, including coordinating a clothing drive for the Topeka Rescue Mission. This is the second consecutive year students have teamed up with the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. "Washburn Law has a strong commitment to encourage students to do pro bono work," said **Lynette Petty, '87**, interim associate dean for student affairs, associate professor of law, and assistant dean for accommodation. Petty has supervised Washburn Law Clinic legal interns since 1992.

"This trip is the Cadillac of pro bono work. The students work with the Washington Legal Clinic staff members who know how to use the students' skills, and the students hit the ground running," she said.

Washburn law student members of Equal Justice Works are eligible for the annual trips as long as they actively participate in fundraising efforts to help cover travel costs. "We held numerous fundraisers. The Pies for Professors fundraiser was an original idea from our group last year that has turned out to be a school and faculty favorite," said Sean Bartholick, a member of Equal Justice Works who did not participate in the trip but was instrumental in fundraising and planning.

"The professors were very generous with money, time, and faces to pie," Bartholick added. The group also coordinated a bake sale and sold energy drinks. The Washburn Student Bar Association and the law school contributed financially as well. "We have nearly doubled the number of students [participating] from last year, and we couldn't have done it without the help from WSBA and the law school."

Other students who helped behind the scenes to make the trip a reality were **Stephen P. Jones, '11**, and **Levi Morris, '11**, and Courtney Steele.

The students' experience in the nation's capital has left an indelible impression about pro bono work within the practice of law.

"What surprised me the most was the passion that each attorney has for the work," Rogers said.

Kyte said he realized that helping others is not synonymous with being poor. "The lawyers helping out were able to make a living for themselves and still managed to help others. The attorneys were not destitute; they were paying their bills. I know I can be an attorney and do something good."



*Professor Jeff Jackson, '92, "receives" a lemon pie, courtesy of an Equal Justice Works fundraiser. Professor Michael Hunter Schwartz, left, wipes pie remnants from his face.*