

FILLING GAPS

THE FIRST JUDICIAL DISTRICT'S JUDICIAL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

By Chapin F. Cimino

It is three months to the day since your law school graduation ceremony. You have just completed sitting for the bar exam, and you know in your bones that you are accomplished, capable and ready to go. Yet instead of feeling proud, instead of letting yourself relax, you feel strangely empty, anxious, even a little let down. Now that you have no more classes to attend, you cannot hide from your new reality: you must find a paying job in law. Of course you knew when you came to law school that the job market was terrible, but this day seemed so far off then. A year, even six months ago, you were sure that by now something would have worked out. After all, you have been faithfully monitoring the on-campus employment office job postings, applying for anything and everything that might be a good fit for you, and you have been networking the best you could for the past three years. But so far nothing has panned out, and you are certainly not alone. Now what?

Many who reach graduation without a job will remain unemployed for three-to-six months after graduation, and some for nine, 12 or even 15 months more. Compassion for these graduates led Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas Judge Lisa M. Rau to ask herself what the court could do to help. That inquiry led to the First Judicial District's Judicial Fellowship Program (JFP).

FILLING MULTIPLE GAPS

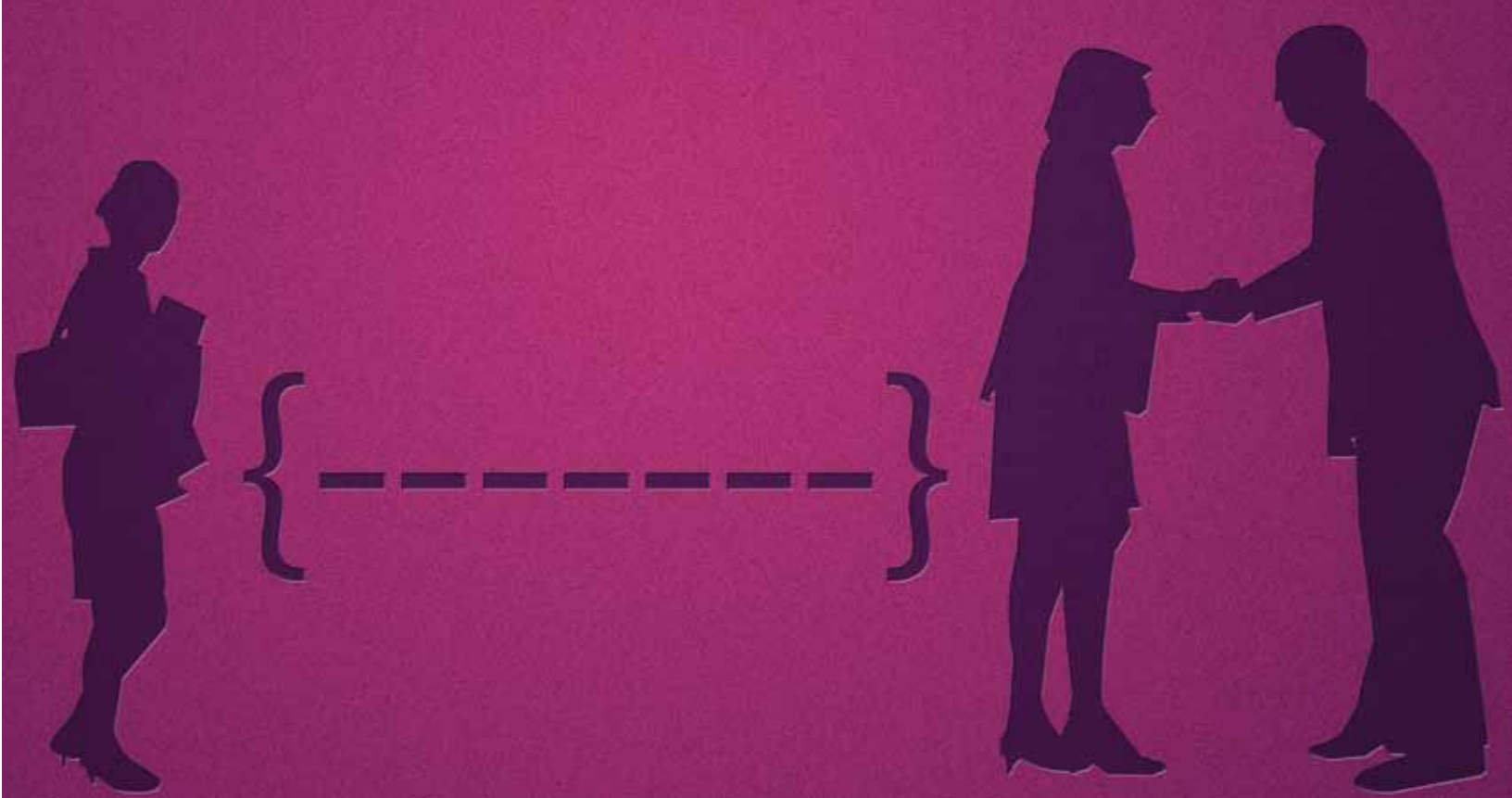
Judge Rau started brainstorming ideas for a jobs-like program during the fall of 2010. Talking it over with colleagues, Judge Rau spotted the opportunity for a double

fill-the-gap experience: while recent grads were suffering from gaps in employment opportunities, the court had gaps of its own to manage. Due to state budget constraints, the First Judicial District had less than a full complement of judges, yet remained committed to both efficiency and quality. Perhaps the court could draw upon the talent of new graduates to maintain these commitments while at the same time providing real work experience to graduates. Judge Rau saw the JFP as a way to help both recent law graduates and her colleagues on the bench.

Judge Rau understood intuitively that a volunteer program like this one had to

be characterized by choice and selectivity. Judges would volunteer to bring on a fellow only if they wanted to serve as a mentor, and each judge would make all his/her own hiring decisions, based on both applicant qualifications and mutual chemistry. Further, participants in the program would need to be flexible: the judge would give the fellow the same work as would be given to a full-time law clerk, but since the fellow would continue looking for a full-time paying job, he/she would work in chambers part-time, and could leave as soon as he/she found a full-time paying position.

With these parameters in place, the JFP would benefit both the fellow and the court. The fellow would immediately put



his/her law degree to work, preventing a resume gap, and would be actively cultivating contacts inside the Bar, expanding his/her network. The hiring judge in turn would benefit from energetic, fresh talent in chambers. And both fellow and judge would know they were performing a valuable public service.

Judge Rau took the idea to the court and to career planning offices at Drexel University Earle Mack School of Law, Temple University Beasley School of Law and University of Pennsylvania Law School. The reaction was unanimously positive. The law schools especially appreciated the idea since the lean hiring market demanded new approaches to career planning. The law schools well understood that traditional on-campus interviewing no longer yielded the kind of results it used to. So, despite the fact that well-watched metrics like *U.S. News and World Report* would not include a volunteer position like the fellowship in its annual ranking tally, the law schools were fully on board with the idea. Likewise, the court immediately saw its value and committed to bringing the JFP to fruition. President Judge Pamela Pryor Dembe called the program “a winner for both the courts and the new graduates.”

CREATING THE JFP

As a first step, members of the three career planning offices, as well as several court administrators, Judge Rau, and her staff formed an organizing committee. Everyone recognized at the outset that, to be a success, the program had to essentially run itself, so as to not strain already overtaxed resources – of the courts, the law schools or the graduates. Technology helped. The committee developed an entirely self-executing electronic application process: an applicant emails materials directly to each judge, the judge makes her own choices about whom to interview and hire, and once an applicant is selected, the judge informs the court’s office of human resources for record-keeping and program-monitoring. Additionally, applicants and judges can access program forms and information on the program’s website. The program is as streamlined as possible.

It didn’t take long before word of the JFP began to spread, and the young program began to grow. Villanova University School of Law came on board, as did the remaining Philadelphia-area law schools (Widener Law School, Rutgers School of Law – Camden and Penn State Dickinson School of Law). Because the JFP has

received inquiries from schools outside the region, the program is now open to all law school graduates.

SUCCESS STORY: FELLOWS GETTING JOBS, CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW FELLOWS

While retention of good talent is often a challenge, not so with the JFP. Indeed, the goal of the program is for each fellow to leave the program as soon as possible. Most fellows leave within months. “The new employers’ gain is our loss,” wrote one judge of her former two fellows, “but we are delighted to have our fellows springboard successfully into a paid position.” Indeed, the program is working exactly as Judge Rau had hoped. Through February 2012, a remarkable 88 percent of fellows participating in the JFP left their fellowship for a paid legal job.

Perhaps the shortest fellowship on record was that of Rebecca Trela of Drexel University Earle Mack School of Law, who was working for Judge Rau. Rebecca applied for a fellowship in the spring of her third year of law school, eight weeks prior to graduation. “I had been interviewing, but nothing had yet worked out, and I didn’t want to end up in a non-legal job with a gap on my resume. So I applied to become

a fellow,” she said. Judge Rau selected her immediately, recognizing her strong academic record and commitment to public interest. Perhaps good karma from the program was all that Rebecca needed – only a few weeks after she accepted Judge Rau’s offer, Rebecca landed a full-time paying clerkship with a Court of Common Pleas judge in a neighboring county. “I was thrilled when Judge Rau selected me right away. My only regret is that I won’t get a chance to work with her,” Rebecca added.

Once at the court, fellows are helped in multiple ways. Fellows are incorporated into the ongoing monthly education program for judicial clerks and permitted to participate in the court-sponsored CLEs that are provided at token cost to judicial clerks. Moreover, when there is word of a paid position, Judge Rau notifies the fellows right away so they can apply. Notably, seven fellows so far have gone on to paid judicial clerkships. Their new employers apparently saw the benefit from their prior training in judicial chambers and were able to rely on recommendations given by their judicial colleagues. Other fellows have moved on to law firms and government positions.

LOTS OF SUPPORTERS

Former fellows are the program’s best cheerleaders. Fellows complete exit evaluations, on which they continually report good experiences. “The fellowship program turned my life around and helped me with every aspect of my job search,” wrote one. “The fellowship was integral to me finding my job,” wrote another. The testimonials from the 27 Fellows who have completed the program and landed paid legal positions show its rewards.

Administrative Judge D. Webster Keogh supported the program when it began and current Administrative Judge John W. Herron has continued the court’s support. “We are just delighted with the program,” Judge Herron said. “We at the court always value our ability to support young lawyers, and more so now than ever before.” Hiring judges appreciate their fellows as well – one judge remarked that her two fellows helped her eliminate a backlog in opinions. Charles A. Mapp Sr., chief deputy court administrator, was another early supporter of the program, seeing how it could help the court and also provide a public service. He appointed the court’s own Lee Swiacki from Human Resources to administer the program, a position that Lee appreciates. “I watch applicants come in jobless, but then leave happily employed and forever

grateful for the court’s support.”

Count the Philadelphia Bar Association among the program’s biggest boosters. Former Chancellor Rudolph Garcia provided input, suggestions and advertising support in the early stages. Current Chancellor John E. Savoth has likewise touted the program, recalling the invaluable experience and mentorship he received early in his career as a clerk for Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice James T. McDermott. “Judicial clerkships offer tremendous insight on the decision-making process and how the courts work,” Savoth said. “To be mentored by a sitting judge and introduced to the members of the Bar affords you the skills, knowledge and connections that put you on an excellent path for the rest of your career in the legal profession.”

TAKING STOCK: CHALLENGES AND NEXT STEPS

Because applications are accepted continuously, each fellow moving on opens a spot for a new fellow. Indeed, throughout the program’s history, demand for fellows has consistently outpaced applications and is only growing: 44 Philadelphia judges are now seeking to mentor fellows. Thus the program’s biggest challenge has proved to be a largely unexpected one, which is trying to attract grads to the post. “I never thought this would be an issue, let alone the issue,” said Judge Rau.

In the end, it comes down to recognizing the value of the experience, especially as contrasted with its alternative: going it alone. If a grad is not employed after the bar exam ends, what are his/her choices? The graduate can work part-time in any paid position – even wait tables – but what then? How will he/she get his/her break into law? As one fellow noted, “It is certainly difficult given our current financial positions to decide to take on an unpaid position. However I can guarantee that the knowledge

and experience you will gain, coupled with the amazing people you will meet and work with will make it well worth it.”

For additional information and fellowship application forms, visit the Judicial Fellowship Program’s website at <http://www.courts.phila.gov/jfp> ■

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