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Cultivating an interest in public interest

By Jack Silverstein
Law Bulletin staff writer

Jerome Gilson knew he'd found a winner.

Gilson — a shareholder at Brinks, Gilson & Lione — was with fellow firm shareholder [Bradley G. Lane](#), evaluating five applications for the second annual Jerome Gilson Honorary Internship, which would give a law student a paid job opportunity for the 2014 summer.

It is one of 16 named Public Interest Law Initiative internships. The organization, which founded the program in 1977, awarded a total of 57 internships in 2014.

Of the five applicants whittled down from an original pool of 112, one — a 2010 graduate of Yale University who spent three years in housing and education reform — jumped out from the rest.

Following graduation, she worked as an AmeriCorps fellow in Melrose Park with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights.

She also worked for three organizations in her hometown neighborhood of Humboldt Park: the Puerto Rican Cultural Center as department director; the education reform group Community as a Campus; and Roberto Clemente Community Academy as an aide to struggling seniors trying to graduate and place into college.

Her name is Militza Pagan, now a second-year student at IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law.

"She did impress us a great deal, as she must have impressed the admissions people at Yale," Gilson said.

Pagan was one of 39 PILI interns from Illinois law schools. Each intern is paired with a public interest organization and receives a \$5,000 grant for 400 hours, working out to \$12.50 per hour.

Pagan worked for Business and Professional People for the Public Interest, known as BPI. She was a researcher with BPI's public housing team and its affordable housing department, studying whether housing units torn down by the Chicago Housing Authority were being replaced.

"I wanted to go to law school because my background has a lot of other types of public interest

work,” Pagan said. “I found that it was (when) I started working with community organizations and nonprofits that I felt I had a purpose.”

Gilson saw Pagan’s purpose, both on the page and in person. He served as Pagan’s mentor during the internship, which meant acting as her sounding board and taking her to lunch throughout the summer with Lane.

“She seems totally committed to working with the Hispanic community and developing economic opportunities for them,” Gilson said. “It is that which really impressed me. Given her background, (this is) a terrific opportunity for someone in law school to prepare for.”

Pagan’s career goal is to continue her work with low-income communities, such as the one in Humboldt Park where she grew up.

“I felt at times like I didn’t have the tools to be able to help them and get them through this period in their lives,” Pagan said about her time conducting citizenship workshops for immigrants in Melrose Park. “Being a lawyer was a tool to continue that work.”

Pagan was one of eight students from IIT Chicago-Kent who received a PILI internship in 2014.

Other Illinois schools with interns were: Loyola University Chicago School of Law (13 interns); The John Marshall Law School (six); DePaul University College of Law and University of Chicago Law School (four each); Northwestern University School of Law (two); and Southern Illinois University School of Law and University of Illinois College of Law (one each).

The Gilson internship has already paid off for Pagan beyond the benefits of the experience. At a PILI intern luncheon, she met members of the Lawyers’ Committee for Better Housing and secured an internship for this fall.

“Just being able to see what kind of work public interest could be was really beneficial,” she said. “It gave me new ideas and new opportunities.”

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