

'Summers' donate legal aid to Anti-Defamation League

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By: MARILYN H. KARFELD *Cleveland Jewish News* Staff Reporter

On Sept. 15, 2004, Christian students at many public schools across the country will pray together at the campus flagpole, usually before school begins.

This national, student-led movement is called See You at the Pole (SYATP).

Tamara Karel, 33, a summer law associate at Benesch, Friedlander, Coplan & Aronoff, spent at least 40 hours the past two months researching for the Anti-Defamation League the constitutionality of SYATP.

Although watchdog groups like the ADL may view SYATP prayer groups as a violation of the Constitution's separation of church and state, a 2001 Supreme Court decision and the Equal Access Act appear to uphold their legality, Karel says.

The Orange High School graduate was one of approximately 25 law students in Cleveland who cumulatively contributed more than 500 hours of pro bono (for the public good) work to the ADL. Rebecca Youngerman, associate director of the ADL's regional chapter in Cleveland, estimates that the Summer Associate Research Program resulted in more than \$75,000 in donated legal work.

"This is a major statement from the participating law firms, as well as an opportunity for the summer associates to engage in pro bono work early in their legal careers," says Youngerman. The program "serves to familiarize young professionals with legal topics that are of concern to the Jewish and greater community."

For her ADL topic this summer, Beachwood resident Rachel Cohen, 25, another Benesch intern, researched the federal Freedom of Information Act and similar state statutes that allow Americans to access government records. The ADL was concerned that if it applied for and received a federal grant, that might expose them to intrusive requests for information.

Potentially, this could make sensitive and proprietary data such as donor lists open to the public. Cohen also investigated the reverse: could the ADL legally peek into the records of groups receiving public dollars?

Receiving federal funds does not open up all of an organization's books to public scrutiny, Cohen learned. Home addresses, phone numbers and trade secrets are restricted information. For the most part, those seeking information are limited to what the organization files publicly.

Five Cleveland law firms participated in the ADL summer program, allowing the interns to research their topics during the workday. The "summers" also met weekly to discuss their topics with the law firm partner in charge of the ADL project and prepared an 8-10 page paper detailing their efforts. Interns from a variety of religious and racial backgrounds delved into the legal issues.

"The ADL is not just about the defamation of Jews," notes Cohen. "They protest all sorts of civil rights issues."

All four Benesch interns participated in the ADL project, says Ron Teplitzky, chair of the ADL's summer associates program and a Benesch partner. In its second year of operation, Cleveland's program mirrors ones in six other U.S. cities, including New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.

The program has proved so popular that next year two more major law firms in Cleveland will lend their summer associates for the project.

The issue of prayer in the school intrigues Karel, a former elementary school teacher who lives in Lakewood with her husband, Chris, and two sons, ages 4 and 7. In 2001, she decided to change careers. After graduating this December from Cleveland-Marshall College of Law at Cleveland State University, she will join Benesch as a full-time associate.

Both Karel and Cohen also participated in the ADL project last year. The information they compiled goes to the organization's national headquarters in New York, which in turn passes it along as needed to regional chapters.

Last summer, Cohen investigated the ADL's copyrighted tolerance education program, "No Place to Hate," and the Philadelphia office asked for a copy of her research.

Cohen explored whether copyright laws protected the slogan as intellectual property. For example, could the ADL be sued because someone else, such as the Ku Klux Klan, used the same "No Place to Hate" language to slam another organization? She concluded that the copyright, clearly noted on all ADL materials, should provide adequate protection.

Last summer, Karel researched ways to stop a convenience store on E. 55th Street from displaying antisemitic murals on its exterior. After looking at statutes prohibiting the infliction of emotional distress, sign ordinances and negligence laws, she concluded, "There's pretty much nothing," anyone could do to remove the offensive murals. The owner of the property has since painted over the building and sold the business.

Both women say the ADL program reinforced their interest in making a difference in the community. They and the two other Benesch interns volunteered at Cleveland's Domestic Violence Center one day this summer, cleaning carpeting, weeding the grounds and providing legal assistance.

"It was a real eye opener," Karel says.

They noticed the women and their children residing at the center lacked basic necessities, so the interns collected those essentials from their colleagues at work. Last week, they delivered to the center a vacuum cleaner, children's clothes and books, and women's professional wear.

After she passes the Ohio bar in February, Karel hopes to focus on litigation and environmental law. She's interested in brown fields legislation, which involves the cleaning up of old industrial property in order to reuse it. As president of the Association for Environmental Law and Sustainability at CSU, Karel organized a conference dealing with Lake Erie, the shoreline and the Cuyahoga River, scheduled for October 2 at CSU.

Cohen, a graduate of Beachwood High School, is president of the Jewish Law Students at Case Western Reserve University, where she's about to begin her third year. She traveled to The Hague last spring to observe the International Court of Justice's hearings on the legality of Israel's security barrier. That led to her founding CaseforIsrael.org, an Israel advocacy group. Major Jewish donors have expressed interest in expanding the advocacy group to other law schools, says Cohen.

A varsity softball player while an undergraduate at Miami University of Ohio, Cohen has also helped to organize fundraisers for the Cystic Fibrosis Association of Cleveland and serves on the board of Cleveland Hillel.

The ADL summer program "was a great experience," says Cohen. "Typically, interns and even young attorneys don't take the time for pro bono work or aren't encouraged to do so. These law firms believe pro bono is something they should do."