

New York Law Journal

WWW.NYLJ.COM

FRIDAY, JUNE 28, 2013

An **ALM** Publication

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NYLJ / RICK KOPSTEIN

Dominican Law Students Shadow Judges to Gain Insider's View of State Access To Justice Program

BY TANIA KARAS

LUIS CALCAÑO and Maria Quezada, two law students in the Dominican Republic, have spent the past month observing how low-income New Yorkers use do-it-yourself

resources to navigate the shoals of the state court system. Their hope, they said, is to come away with ideas they can implement back home.

Calcaño and Quezada are students at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo law school.

For the past three weeks, they and nine fellow students have interned with judges of Dominican descent in courts in Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, the Bronx and Newark, N.J., as part of an initiative designed to give them an inside view of New York State

Judge Fern Fisher and Dominican law student **Luis Calcaño** in her chambers at 111 Centre St. earlier this week.

Courts' Access to Justice program.

"Programs like the do-it-yourself forms, that's one of the things we think we can replicate in the Dominican Republic," Calcaño said, referring to a free online court form creator through the state court system's CourtHelp website. "Also, the Volunteer Lawyers Project [can be replicated]. We have a lot of law students, for example, who don't have a place to practice before they graduate and a lot of people who don't have the



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opportunity to afford an attorney.” CourtHelp had more than 793,000 visits last year.

“One of the things I’d like to bring to my country is protection of children in Family Court cases,” Quezada said. “We don’t have an agency that gets in front of the court on their behalf. In cases where maybe the mother died and the father is a criminal, the children sometimes *desaparecen*, with no protection,” she said, using the Spanish word for disappear.

The law students have been assigned to Family, Housing and Surrogate’s courts. Friday is their last day before returning to the Dominican Republic.

Their internship program is coordinated by Supreme Court Justice Fern Fisher, the deputy chief administrative judge for city courts, and Fred Rooney, the former longtime director of City

University of New York School of Law’s Community Legal Resource Network. It kicked off with a week-long crash course on the U.S. justice system at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Students then headed to the courts to see justice in action.

“Access to justice is a global issue that’s not just limited to the United States,” said Fisher, who traveled to the Dominican Republic three times to meet the students and coordinated their placements with judges. “New York state is a leader in technology for providing access to justice, so we hope they get a better understanding of our system.”

“The Dominican judges here have a strong identity and they’ve all expressed interest in helping the students,” Rooney said. “We’re trying to show them how the U.S. system of government

THE 11 Dominican law student participating in the program are, from left standing, **Enmanuel Alcantara Alfonse**, **Luis Daniel Sosa Brea**, **Isabel Cabrera Riazanova**; and, sitting from left, **Violeta Quezada**, **Jesus Noel Tejada**, **Rosania Fulcar de la Rosa**, **Gregory Sena**, **Luis Calcaño** and **Massiel Montaña**; and, standing at right, **Dominique Rincón** and **Geraldin Bido**.

works and how access to justice is a human right.”

The students are interning with Fisher; Justice Rolando Acosta of the Appellate Division, First Department; Queens Family Court Judge Maria Arias; Court of Claims Judge Faviola Soto; Acting Supreme Court Justice Manuel Mendez in Manhattan; Bronx Family Court Judge Llinet Beltre-Rosado; Brooklyn Family Court Judge Leticia Ramirez; Brooklyn Family Court Supervising Judge Jeanette Ruiz; Manhattan Surrogate Rita Mella; and Newark Municipal Court Judge Victoria Pratt.

Justice Incubator

Rooney recently returned to the United States after spending nine months in the Dominican Republic on a Fulbright Scholar grant to set up a law student exchange program at the Santo Domingo law school. While there, he created the country’s first law school-based “incubator for justice,” similar to the one he set up at CUNY Law in 2007.

The CUNY Law incubator trains graduates in business-of-law skills such as billing, bookkeeping, record-keeping and building



Rooney Joins Touro To Advise 'Incubators'

Fred Rooney will soon join Touro Law Center to lead the creation of a resource center for the spreading national trend of law schools creating legal residencies and "incubator" programs for solo practitioners. He will also oversee the launch of an incubator at Touro Law for recent graduates entering solo practice that is set to open in the upcoming academic year. Rooney will start on Monday.

Touro's new International Center for Post-Graduate Development & Justice will provide information and training sessions for

professors, students, bar leaders and members of the judiciary on designing programs to increase access to justice. "Our center will serve as a national and international resource for this movement," Dean Patricia Salkin said in a statement. "Fred Rooney will be an invaluable member of our staff and is already recognized as a leading educator and administrator in this field."

From 1998 to last year, Rooney served as the founding director of the City University of New York School of Law's Community Legal Resource Network for CUNY Law graduates. In 2007, he started the first-ever Incubator for Justice, an 18-month training program that

has been replicated by about a dozen law schools nationally. He also started the LaunchPad for Justice, a partnership with the New York State Courts that helps low-income New Yorkers find legal representation.

Most recently, Rooney spent nine months in the Dominican Republic as a Fulbright Scholar at the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo law school setting up an incubator program there. He has also served as a scholar-in-residence at Symbiosis Law School in Pune, India, where he set up a legal aid clinic in a rural area.

—Tania Karas

a client base, with a goal to help them set up solo or small-group practices dedicated to providing "low bono" legal services to people who can't afford an attorney. It was the first program of its kind, and Rooney has since helped set up about a dozen justice incubators elsewhere in the United States, including at Pace Law School (NYLJ, April 9).

The Santo Domingo community legal resource center, which launched this spring, is Rooney's first attempt at bringing the school-run law firm model overseas. Though CUNY Law's program is for law graduates, typically those with a few years of experience practicing law, the Santo Domingo counterpart employs current students under the super-

vision of practicing attorneys, with support from their law school and the Dominican Attorney General's Office. Students may continue working there for one year after they've graduated.

"In the Dominican Republic, there is no clinical legal education, so the students have really little to no opportunity to develop their practical skills in school," Rooney said. "This gives them the skills they need to practice."

Five of the visiting students are part of the incubator, including Calcaño and Quezada. They've begun setting up their office, attracting clients and creating resources to better inform Dominican citizens of their entitlements under the law.

"One of the biggest differences

is, people here know their human rights, and in the Dominican Republic they have no idea," said Quezada, a part-time law student who also works for the Dominican Ministry of Women. "Here people go into court and demand their rights."

Calcaño, who will complete his law degree this October, is coordinating technology aspects of the justice center, such as a web-based court documents site. He said he was attracted to the non-traditional career opportunity the center provides.

"In the Dominican Republic, there are only two ways to get into the practice. One is public service and the other is to work for a private office," Calcaño said. "We promote the solo practitio-

ner. That breaks from the typical career path."

The center has received funds from the U.S. State Department to provide free legal services to clients in two areas: gender violence and LGBT issues. It has already begun representing women who have suffered from domestic violence and LGBT victims of employment discrimination or physical violence.

"Of all the work I've done, what I'm most proud of is the incubator in the Dominican Republic," Rooney said. "There is such dire, unmet legal need, and this provides hope for people who've been marginalized since, well, forever."

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