Kelly Kwan and Gloria-Leilani Palma Chosen 2020 Patsy T. Mink Legislative Fellows

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the William S. Richardson School of Law again is supporting summer legislative fellowships for law students with Hawai‘i's congressional representatives. This continues a long-standing program that honors the late Congresswoman Patsy Takemoto Mink.

Gloria-Leilani N. Palma ’21 and Kelly A.S.Y. Kwan ’22 will be the Patsy T. Mink Legislative Fellows this year. Both will work remotely this summer; Kwan will work with Sen. Mazie Hirono and Palma will work with Sen. Brian Schatz. Both awardees are members of the Law School’s Ulu Lehua Scholars Program.

“I am most inspired by Congresswoman Mink’s unfailing belief that we should all strive for more in hopes of creating a better world,” said Kwan, a co-founder of CJ’s Cubby that provided food assistance to law students with food insecurity.

“This summer I will be working with Senator Hirono’s office and looking at federal issues relating to the environment and the federal Department of Justice,” Kwan explained. She has worked with women in correctional facilities, and she is interested in criminal justice reform.

Palma, who was recently elected president of the Student Bar Association, said she is honored to be a Mink Fellow and grateful to Sen. Schatz’s office for allowing her to work remotely. “As a law clerk with the Senator’s office I'll be helping the domestic policy team with upcoming legislation,” said Palma.

She added, “I'm excited to further my understanding of policy-making at the federal level, and I'm already seeing how my Richardson education has enhanced my understanding of the law.” Palma has a history of advocacy for some of the most marginalized in the community and is passionate about women’s equality.

Women law students established the Mink fellowship in 2003, a year after the Congresswoman’s death, to provide “a truly unique opportunity for a law student to work with the Washington, D.C. staff of a member of Hawai‘i’s Congressional delegation,” said Troy J.H. Andrade, Assistant Professor of Law and Director of the Ulu Lehua Scholars Program.

The fellowship “honors the values and integrity of Congresswoman Mink’s life and work,” added Andrade.

Through the 17-year history of the program, Andrade said the fellowship has offered clarity for many of the participants' career goals and inspired them to return to their community as assets. “Fellows express great gratitude and appreciation for
Congresswoman Mink’s legacy and the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be part of the fellowship program,” said Andrade.

“Gloria and Kelly are so deserving of this great honor,” he continued. “Both have, like Mink, demonstrated time and time again an unfailing commitment to the underserved, and a deep passion for justice.”

Mink was the first woman of color elected to the United States Congress, and served for 24 years in the U.S. House of Representatives. She was an outspoken advocate of equal rights for women – as well as all minorities. Among many efforts, she championed Title IX legislation, which became a portion of the Education Amendments of 1972, and is named in her honor.

Law School Dean Avi Soifer noted, “Title IX specifically and Patsy Mink’s work in general made major leaps forward by giving women equal access to a broad range of opportunities in education.”

The Mink Fellowship honors young law students who demonstrate the passion, drive, and commitment to justice that Mink embodied throughout her lifetime. Facing substantial discrimination early in her career, Mink had a favorite saying: “I can’t change the past, but I can certainly help somebody else in the future so they don’t have to go through what I did.”