Law students shun money to serve public

They don't want to lose sight of the quality of life

By Susan Manuel
Star-Bulletin

Not all law students have dollar signs in their eyes. There was competition this year among University of Hawaii law students for small grants to do non-profit legal work.

"It's dangerous to generalize that law students want to make a lot of money," says student Darrell Arakaki. "It's real easy to think about that and lose sight of other things, like quality of life or doing something interesting."

Summer jobs are crucial to helping young law students land future, career-track jobs. But while corporate firms were winning and dining many of their classmates, Arakaki and five other students worked for less pay and less glamour in non-profit offices on grants from the Advocates for Public Interest Law.

The program was set up by the William S. Richardson School of Law's class of 1985. Grantees have multiplied from two last year to six.

Two graduates will receive $1,000 awards, aug. 29 for their work -- a largely symbolic honor meant to encourage young lawyers to lend their services to the less fortunate or to issues of public concern.

"You don't make a whole lot of money," says Catherine Kau, 33, one of this year's winners and who, like Arakaki, worked at the Native Hawaiian Legal Project. "I got $1,500 for two months. If you're in a firm you could make that in a month."

A universal motivation among the grantees is the belief that law can help individuals, or that laws can be changed to be more responsive to public needs.

"Before I started law school I was a social worker working with Hawaiian families," Kau said. "I felt I could do more things with a law degree. I felt overworked and underpaid. I was so idealistic three years ago."

Kau is also on the board of directors for Na Lolo No Na Kanaka, (Lawyers for the People), and she plans to return to the Native Hawaiian Legal Project to work on a Hawaiian rights handbook. Although others say she's given many uncompensated hours to public interest work, Kau says she's puzzled by the HI law-school honor, fears she didn't pass the bar examination and says she'd feel uncomfortable in a corporate firm.

Even if they want to, few law graduates will find a career in public interest law. Particularly in Hawaii, the opportunities are minimal. About 20 work for Legal Aid Society of Hawaii, and another 10 to 20 in other small non-profit groups.

Getting more young private lawyers interested in donating time is a goal of graduate Iris Arakawa, 27, the other honoree and student member of the Advocates board of directors. The Hawaii Bar Association may also adopt a mandatory "pro bono" policy, she says.

She plans to work for the public defender's office -- one outlet for those with socially conscious leanings.

Student involvement in public interest law is small but growing, in part due to a faculty that stresses ethics. They're "publicly minded," says Arakaki, but students tend to be seduced by the corporate recruiters who visit with promises of fat incomes.

"After you've gone through three years of law school amassing huge loans, it's difficult to accept a job at Legal Aid that pays $18,000," agrees Kau.

Arakaki researched old Hawaiian trails and restitution and reparation for Hawaiians.

"I think it's important to find an area of law you're interested in, rather than drawing a distinction between public interest and corporate law."

Student Roland Talon worked on Hawaiian homelands disputes and genealogies at the Native Hawaiian Legal Project. A Kamehameha Schools grad, he "always wanted to better conditions of the Hawaiian people."

"It's really challenging because some of the memos I've done, there's no law."

By Deon Seng, Star-Bulletin
We're coming up with new principles that may someday become law."

Emmanuel Guerrero, 26, worked voluntarily for Legal Aid near his home in Nanakuli last year and as a grantee this summer, researching landlord/tenant disputes and food stamp entitlements. It was a stressful time, he says, that made him "feel old."

He plans to practice family law in Waianae after passing the bar: "Getting into law school is a privilege, and I want to return something to the community."

Custody disputes were the subject of student Carmel Patton's work with Maluhia O Wahine (part of the Family Violence Treatment Program at Waikiki Community Center) and attorney Margaret Egbert. The two women are studying bias against battered mothers among the 4,000 divorces in Family Court in 1987.

"I want to represent battered women once I pass the bar," Patton said. "The grant has shown me the research needs to continue on what happens to children after divorce (when divorce has involved spouse abuse)."

She is also helping Egbert and Allison Jacobs Pendragon organize a foundation for battered women.

William McGrath, now in Samoa, worked on gaining political asylum for Sri Lankan clients at Na Loio, an organization of only three attorneys who specialize in immigration law and serving the poor.

Burgess Dell-Wilson worked with Sherry Broder, a private attorney who devotes much of her practice to a variety of non-profit law. Dell-Wilson helped find funding for a Vietnamese refugee child under Broder's guardianship. She worked on the case of a hospital worker exposed to a toxin. She helped a Chinese student find sponsorship to study here. And she researched the legal rights of the board of trustees for the Office of Hawaiian Affairs.

"There's a major need for attorneys to donate some time to public interest law, but unfortunately most have very little time to do that," Dell-Wilson said. "A good way of encouraging them is to provide them with a student."

"There's a lot of satisfaction in doing this kind of work. I didn't come into law school for the money."