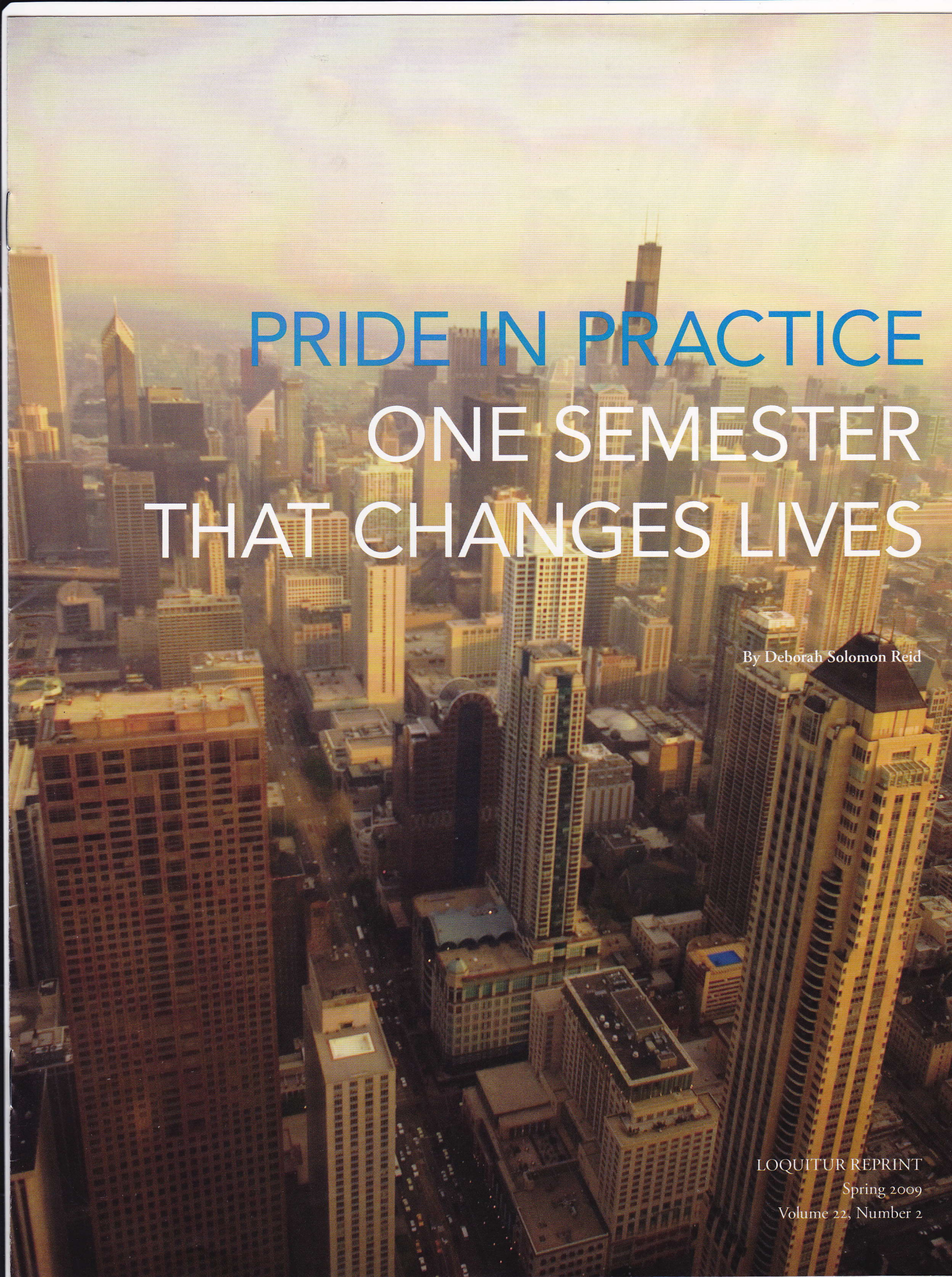




PRIDE IN PRACTICE ONE SEMESTER THAT CHANGES LIVES

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The value of experiential learning—hands-on, real-world training through externships and in-house legal clinics—is becoming recognized, and law students are graduating better prepared. Jessica Werber '07 in Washington, D.C.

Law school used to be all theory and no practice, with new graduates expected to learn both substantive law and that mysterious combination of skills and acumen known as “lawyering” on the job.

That world is rapidly changing. The prestigious Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, in their 2007 publication *Educating Lawyers: Preparation for the Profession of Law*, reports on law schools recognizing what VLS has been practicing for a quarter of a century.

A signal offering in this area, the Semester in Practice (SiP) enrolled its first students in 1984. Today more than 1,000 SiP graduates are part of the flow of students who have participated in VLS’s full range of experience-based courses. Students in the SiP earn 13 academic credits for a semester spent apprenticing away from campus in a governmental, public interest, or private legal setting under the guidance of an experienced

attorney who serves as a mentor. “One of the great joys of the job is to watch students toward the end of the semester,” says Jeff White ’87, who spent his semester in practice with Judge Franklin Billings in the U.S. District Court in Rutland. Jeff left private practice after 15 years and now is a member of the VLS faculty supporting students during their practicum. “They’re really emerging as lawyers for the first time.”

The SiP was created by VLS faculty, who wanted to introduce off-site experiential learning into the curriculum. The idea was taken up by then Dean Jonathon Chase, who named the program and hired two experienced attorneys, Liz Ryan Cole and Judith Kasper, as codirectors to design and administer the course. Professor Cole has been with the program ever since, serving as its director and presiding over its evolution into a model for other schools to emulate. “We were one of the first law schools to put significant resources into a full semester-long



Professor Liz Ryan Cole with a student

Mark Washburn

"When other law schools consider adding a practicum-based course to their curriculum, they call us to find out what we do." — Professor Liz Ryan Cole

practicum" she says. "Today, when other law schools consider adding a practicum-based course to their curriculum, they call us to find out what we do."

The SiP's academic focus is critical, says Cole, who has developed course materials and procedures to quantify the educational experience and satisfy the American Bar Association's accreditation standards. Students participate in a seminar, currently taught online, and submit journals recording their activities (while never breaching confidentiality) and personal reactions for discussion with their VLS-based faculty. They continue the cycle of learning with a final reflective paper and a plan for their future professional development.

For many participants, the program's true hallmark is the care that goes into matching each student with a mentor in a placement that will best serve a student's individual educational

plan. Applicants learn to be very specific about their goals for the semester. Then Cole and White get to work to find the right setting for the pursuit of those goals, whether as close as Montpelier, Vermont, or as distant as New Zealand. "Placements are student driven," says White. "We'll consider developing a new placement anywhere a student wants to go."

Beyond student preference, the critical element in site selection is the mentor, whose guidance will ultimately determine the quality of a student's SiP experience. This one-on-one relationship is a core element of the SiP's design, says White. "It's a special opportunity for access not usually available in standard internships."

"We look for people who are experienced, have a passion for what they are doing, and want to share that passion," says Cole—experienced attorneys with control over their time, expertise in their field, the authority to make things happen, and the desire to share what they know. "You don't have to give up your practice," she tells prospective mentors, concerned about the time they may be committing. "Just open your arms and bring the student with you."

VLS provides support to mentors in many ways. For example, mentors are eligible for full scholarships to workshops VLS offers for attorneys and law professors. When VLS graduate Talha Zobair '93, now Senior Tax Counsel with Raytheon Company, returned to the Upper Valley for a recent two-day workshop he said, "I still look back to the Semester in Practice program as one of the most outstanding learning experiences I had at VLS. The SiP program left such a positive impression on me that I try where I work to replicate it for other students."

Nicor Advanced Energy LLC, Chicago, Illinois

Having spent the previous summer working with the public defender in Nashville, Sincere Richards '09 wanted to learn more about transactional law—contracts, negotiations, mergers and acquisitions. "I also said I would prefer an in-house placement," he says.

He was matched with Koby Bailey, an attorney with Nicor Advanced Energy LLC, a diversified utility company headquartered in Chicago. As Nicor's director of regulatory affairs,



Sincere Richards '09

"From observing him, I learned what it was like to be a lawyer before I was one." — Jessica Werber '07



Jessica Werber '07

Bailey was able to arrange for Richards to sit in on business meetings and see that he was exposed to a variety of company operations—litigation, marketing, and call center engineering as well as regulatory issues. "I asked Koby if I could do some employment work, too," says Richards, "and he said, 'Sure. The experience will be good for you.' We didn't talk every day, but his door was always open. He was very receptive to any ideas I had."

"I gave Sincere the same feedback I would have to any young associate," says Bailey. Among other things, Richards learned that in-house attorneys serve just one client, and that their work product is viewed as part of the production process. For him this was a new concept. "In law school, you overana-

lyze; there's no stopping point in your brain. But that can slow down efficiency. At Nicor I learned that in business you have to go with the most solid thing you have and present it concisely." Richards has decided to seek an in-house position after he graduates.

Linowes and Blocher LLP, Bethesda, Maryland

Jessica Werber '07 had several goals for her SiP experience: to improve her research and writing skills, gain greater substantive knowledge in an area of environmental law, learn how a law firm worked as a business, and, incidentally, scope out the Washington, D.C. area, where she thought she might like to practice.

She achieved them all during her semester with the Bethesda law firm of Linowes and Blocher LLP, under the guidance of partner Jim Witkin, who probably wins the prize for mentorship. Witkin's first contact with VLS was through the SiP, and he has mentored more than a dozen SiP students, but he now also takes summer students and master's degree students and has hired VLS graduates as well. Witkin, who specializes in real estate law and brownfields matters, introduced Werber to the intricacies of the Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation and Liability Act (CERCLA), as well as a range of other environmental and land use issues. He pulled her into meetings, let her sit in on conference calls, and made sure that she, like his other SiP students, had a chance to get out of the office occasionally—attending conferences and just getting to know the area.

Werber emerged from the SiP with some solid writing samples and a number of attorney contacts in her chosen field, both of which proved useful in her job search. She is now working with the Environmental Integrity Project in D.C., and stays in touch with Witkin to learn what he is doing and hear his thoughts on their common field of interest. "From observing him, I learned what it was like to be a lawyer before I was one," she says. "He made the projects I did meaningful. He'd say 'Here's what I want you to look up and here's why it's important.' He was an excellent teacher. I continue to appreciate that today."

Maritime New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand

Of all SiP students, Debra Doby '09 traveled the farthest to pursue her multiple interests in maritime law, international law, and indigenous peoples. Her faculty supervisor, Bruce Duthu (then VLS's academic dean and now a professor of Native American studies at Dartmouth College), connected these dots and, influenced by his own experience working with indigenous people in Australia, came up with the perfect point of intersection: New Zealand. Taking this as her cue, Cole activated her far-flung network of contacts, and found a mentor for Doby at Maritime New Zealand (MNZ), a governmental agency located in Wellington.

Stephanie Winson, head of MNZ legal department, expressed an initial reluctance to mentor a student because she understood the increased responsibilities that mentoring entails. Winson later commented that Debra's "contributions were such that, although there was an increased workload on me as mentor, her performance within the team alleviated much of the daily workload. [She] contributed as an equal member of the legal team in a way that made the other lawyers feel inspired and possibly even challenged."

Four weeks into Doby's semester, Duthu paid a personal call—standard SiP procedure in accordance with the American Bar Association requirement for periodic faculty supervision of field-based courses. "It's important to make sure the student is doing substantive work and not just making copies and fetching coffee," says Duthu. Another issue that often requires sorting out during these visits is helping with timely and descriptive feedback—on both sides of the equation. Mentors may not know how to give it, and students are often reluctant to ask. "More often than not, students are grateful for the experience and reluctant to make demands," says White. In such situations a little coaching from the VLS faculty supervisor can go a long way.

At Maritime New Zealand, Duthu found none of these problems. Doby was happily immersed in complex and challenging projects. "Ms. Winson treated me as an attorney instead of an intern. I obtained the rare opportunity to study and interpret international treaties and applied this knowledge daily to resolve various domestic shipping disputes." Winson



proved to be an ideal mentor, sensitive to Doby's strengths and weaknesses, and generous with her time and counsel. "The four-week assessments were very helpful in guiding us through the process," Winson later wrote.

Back in Vermont, Doby reflects on what she has gained: the confidence that she can operate successfully within a foreign legal system; the practical techniques Winson taught her for managing her time and counseling clients; and, perhaps most important, the discovery that she truly enjoys the actual practice of law. Her SiP with Maritime New Zealand affirmed her ambition to work in international trade and shipping.

Attorney General's Office, Montpelier, Vermont

While Doby traveled halfway round the world for her SiP, Trey Martin '08 stayed in Vermont, where he and his wife had lived on and off since they both graduated from Middlebury College. Martin came to VLS after obtaining graduate degrees in

"This SiP helped me understand that I could be the kind of person I wanted to be, while being the lawyer I wanted to be." — Trey Martin '08

English literature and education, and teaching for 10 years in public and private schools in Vermont, California, and Ohio. "I always intended to go to law school eventually," he says. It just took a little more time than he'd planned. He signed up for the SiP because he saw it as a way to connect with the legal market in Vermont, which can be difficult to break into. His experience turned out to be far richer than he anticipated.

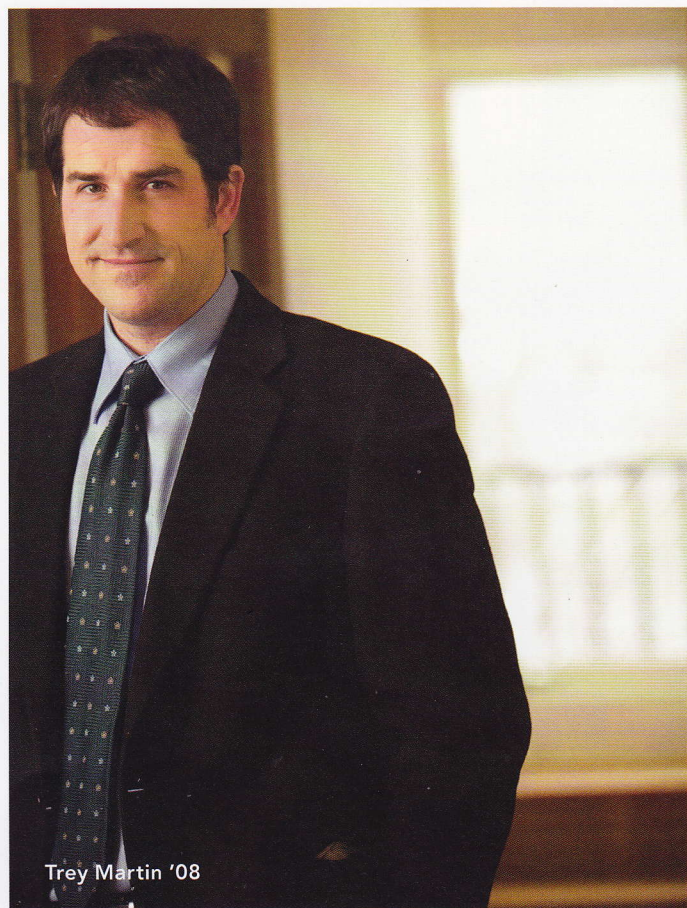
His mentor, Mark Sciarrotta '96, himself an SiP alumnus, was then a litigator in the Vermont Attorney General's office. Sciarrotta, now senior counsel for the Vermont Electric Power Company, had already mentored several other VLS students. He tries to impart three things to all his students, he says: professionalism (defined as hard work, thorough preparation, applying a common sense take on the issues, and treating the bench and bar with respect); the need for balance between work and personal life; and a commitment to the bar in the largest sense. "Lawyers share a common ideal—the notion that

the practice of law is important, that courtrooms are sacred. We are part of an extended community with a long tradition central to the way our society works, and we should treat each other accordingly."

Martin absorbed this notion along with more day-to-day wisdom. "I shadowed Mark for four months. I read next to him, drafted next to him, and observed when he called home to let his wife know he'd be working late. I learned from him how much organization and discipline it takes to be a lawyer—keeping files organized, making copies, following a schedule. You can't get anything done if you don't know where your files are." But he also absorbed what he describes as Sciarrotta's spiritual foundation. "All Mark did was build bridges. He treated everyone with respect, as he wanted to be treated. I learned that you can litigate without being an enemy—it's not 'us and them.' This SiP helped me understand that I could be the kind of person I wanted to be, while being the lawyer I wanted to be."

Martin is now an associate at Downs Rachlin Martin PLLC, one of Vermont's leading law firms. His personal qualifications—a high grade point average, varied life experience, and strong references, in addition to having been editor-in-chief of the *Vermont Law Review*—opened that door. That is not to say that SiPs don't help with postgraduate employment. The faculty want the SiP to help students make informed choices about career and jobs. "The SiP is not a job placement service," says Jeff White. And that's a good thing, he believes, because students who are not looking for a job from a mentor are more willing to ask questions and direct their learning from the experience.

Among the multitude of students and mentors, there is a common thread in these experiences: almost every student who completes an SiP has a deeper understanding of substance and skills than can be obtained in the classroom alone, an enhanced résumé, and helpful contacts. And every successful placement strengthens Vermont Law School's reputation and creates opportunities for future students. Stephanie Winson was so pleased with Debra Doby's contribution to Maritime New Zealand that she plans to recommend the SiP program to other government agencies. Nicor's Koby Bailey is equally enthusiastic: "Sincere was probably the best clerk I ever worked with. I would take another SiP person in a heartbeat."



Trey Martin '08

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