

Pickering Fellowships Offer Hands-on Experience, Lessons in Confidence

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Conquering a courtroom or dominating a deal requires confidence, and WilmerHale's Pickering Fellowships instill in junior attorneys just that. Current and past participants agree that the Fellowships—which places associates in various public interest organizations in cities where the firm has offices—have equipped them with the tools (and inspiration) needed to become well-rounded, sensitive and skilled in their respective areas of practice.

The Pickering Fellowships were established in 2006 to honor one of the firm's founding partners, John H. Pickering, who is remembered as an exceptional mentor and an active participant in a range of public interest organizations and activities throughout his career.

"I'm proud to work at a firm that is so committed to the community and to pro bono work," says [David Giordano](#), an associate in the firm's Boston office who recently wrapped up his fellowship at the Medical-Legal Partnership for Children at Boston Medical Center. "The Fellowship itself is an extraordinary dedication of resources and it just continues the firm's position as the leading pro bono firm in the country."



For Katherine Gillespie, a member of the Litigation/Controversy Department in the Washington, DC office and the firm's first Fellow, it was the independence and change of pace—going from criminal to civil work—that made the fellowship experience a success.

"For someone like me who has been at the firm pretty much for my whole career, it's useful to gain experience working with different lawyers and being out on your own for a bit," explains Gillespie, who was elected a counsel at WilmerHale during her fellowship.

Gillespie spent the first six months of this year with the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs. She focused primarily on equal employment opportunity and immigration projects, and also got the chance to participate in her first trial in federal court during her fellowship.

In addition to the Washington Lawyers' Committee and the Medical-Legal Partnership for Children, the Pickering Fellowships place associates at the Legal Counsel for the Elderly in Washington, DC; the Political Asylum/Immigration Representation Project in Boston; and the National Center for Law and Economic Justice and the Urban Justice Center, both in New York. The fellowship program is

open to associates three to six years out of law school who have been with WilmerHale for at least two years, and in each fellowship associates are guided and advised by supervisors at the various organizations, rather than by partners at the firm.

“Professionally, it’s been a tremendous experience,” reflects Giordano, a member of the firm’s Intellectual Property Department. “I’ve been able to learn new areas of the law that aren’t necessarily related to my work at the firm, but the process of learning and the client contact have made me a better, more confident lawyer.”

Giordano, whose work at the MLPC focused primarily on housing issues and taking on cases at the non-profit Upham’s Corner Health Center, says part of what made his fellowship such a memorable experience was the range of work he did each day—whether systemic or case work—and, of course, his clients.

“I called the Boston Housing Authority for one of my clients [who hadn’t been able to get an appointment], and she got one for the next day,” explains Giordano. “She left me this wonderful message thanking me and saying how happy she was that I was on her side. . . . That’s an example of how grateful the clients can be for the advocacy that we do. . . . It reminds me why this work is so important.”

As a result of his experience at the MLPC, Giordano says he plans to take on more pro bono cases as he resumes his practice at the firm, a sentiment echoed by current Pickering Fellow Roberto Gonzalez.



Gonzalez, an associate in the Washington, DC office who practices in the Litigation/Controversy Department, says the Pickering Fellowships can offer a significant boost to the professional growth of a junior lawyer, because pro bono cases are such a valuable developmental tool. “You have a lot more autonomy and responsibility,” he explains.

Gonzalez, who is focusing on equal employment opportunity and immigrant rights projects during his fellowship, calls his experience at the Washington Lawyers’ Committee “eye opening,” and says he’ll take a lot of what he’s learning back to WilmerHale.

“It’s been really interesting having individuals as clients,” says Gonzalez. “You feel needed in a real, human way.”

“The ability to make even a small difference in an individual’s life is phenomenal, [and] to have that opportunity is just outstanding, particularly for a young lawyer who maybe hasn’t had that experience yet in [his or her] career,” echoes Gillespie.

And, according to Gillespie, Gonzalez and Giordano, transitioning to the fellowship program was pretty much a seamless process, as their decision to leave the firm for six months came with the full support of its administration and partners.

“People should not be discouraged from applying if they have some notion that it’s going to be frowned upon by individuals at the firm,” suggests Gillespie. “I found everyone to be very supportive

and enthusiastic about it.”

Gonzalez agrees. “It’s clear that WilmerHale’s leadership is fully behind the fellowships.”

“I am much more confident in my ability to tackle new issues or tasks,” declares Gillespie. “[The fellowship] has given me the confidence to know that I can take on new challenges; I’ve learned to trust my instincts a lot more.”

With a new set of associates about to begin the program—[Terrence McNeil](#) was recently selected for a fellowship at the MLPC and [Katherine Zucca](#) was selected for a fellowship at the Washington Lawyers’ Committee, while [Bronwen Blass](#) is completing her fellowship at Legal Counsel for the Elderly—the Pickering Fellowships continue as an apt tribute to the legacy of John Pickering, giving junior lawyers the confidence they need to serve the community and excel in their careers.