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BY HOWARD MCEWEN | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

HIGHLAND HEIGHTS - Students at Northern Kentucky University's Chase College of Law have represented about 20 defendants, many sex offenders, through the Ohio Justice and Policy Center this year.

"There is no other opportunity like this," said the center's executive director David Singleton. "Chase students do participate in externships where they do research for judges and law offices, but in terms of getting the opportunity to litigate cases in federal and state court under the close supervision of lawyers, there is nothing like what we are doing."

The students - required to be in their third and final year of law school - represent the center's clients as if they are fully licensed attorneys.



"Initially I did it because we have the opportunity to go to court," said Kenyatta Mickles, 26. "You can go to law school a long time before entering a courtroom, but now that I'm still there I really enjoy the work we get to do - the interaction is very hands on. It's probably the most practical class I've had at law school."

Chase students are allowed to do this work because of the center's action.

"Until recently there was no provision for local law students to practice in federal court, but we convinced the local federal court to adopt a student practice rule," said Singleton. Singleton and two other experienced lawyers supervise the students' work.

"One of the critical components is that we are the attorney who argues in the court," said student Margie Slagle. "We do the opening, closing and interviews of the witnesses. It's very remarkable for law students to say they've been in a federal court and argued before a judge."

Slagle, a 43-year old mother of three, recently won the right of an Ohio prisoner to receive treatment for hepatitis C - a disease often contracted sexually or through intravenous drug use.

When told that her work with the center would represent sex offenders dealing with the requirement that they live 1,000 feet from a school, she thought that would be a challenge.

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"What I learned is how ignorant I was," said Slagle. "When you hear sex offender, you hear child molester. That absolutely is not the case. Quite frankly, none of the clients I have met pose a threat to my children or anyone else's children - often it was a consensual relationship with girls who were too young to consent. Fast forward 10 years raising families and suddenly they are being asked to leave their home - financially that's very difficult; personally that devastates a family."

Representing sex offenders is only one aspect of the center's work that Singleton says is to "provide legal representation to the most marginalized and despised members of the community."

"If you believe the American legal system, you have to believe they are still entitled to the best representation they can provide."

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