

# A Life-Changing Trip

*How traveling to three rural legal aid locations around the state for the first Texas Pro Bono Spring Break program enriched the lives of 49 law students—and the more than 300 people they helped.*

BY JOHN MORTHLAND

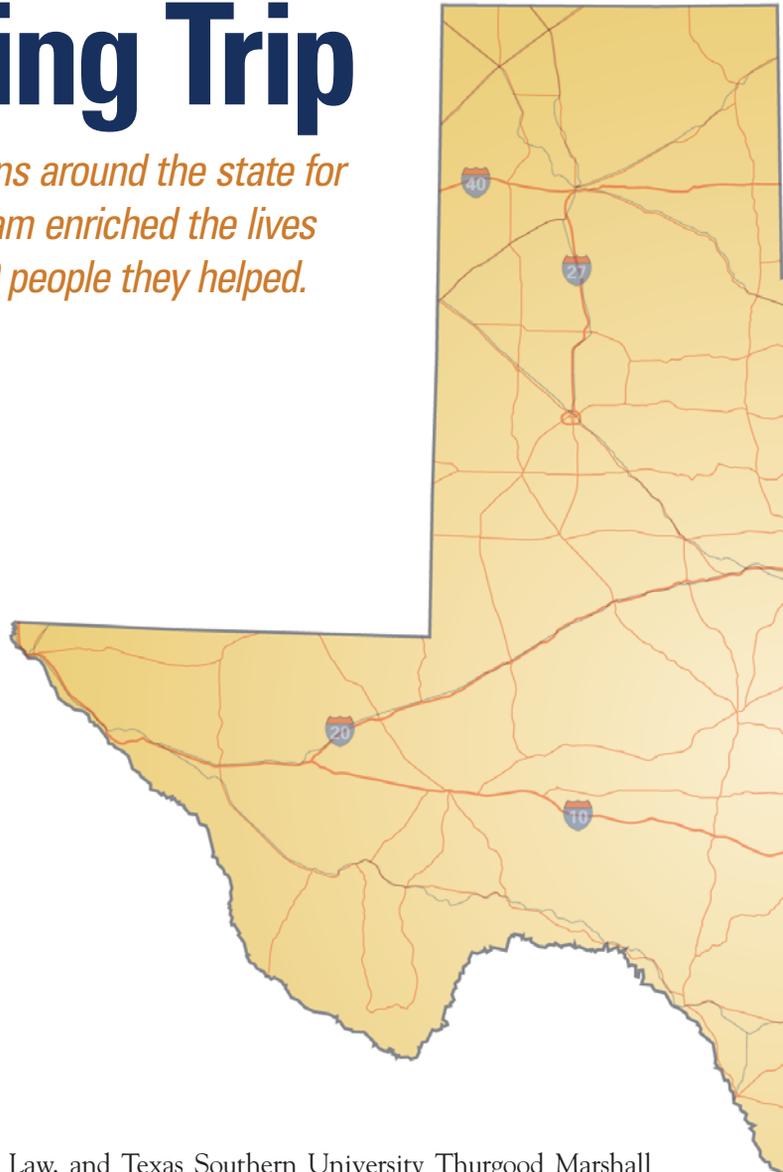
**ALAINA SMITH, A THIRD-YEAR STUDENT AT BAYLOR LAW SCHOOL, SPENT HER SPRING BREAK DRAFTING WILLS FOR CORPUS CHRISTI SENIOR CITIZENS.**

“We learned about wills in law school, of course,” Smith said, “but this was the first time I’d actually gotten the chance to draft a document.” Smith, who participated in the first Texas Pro Bono Spring Break, a program sponsored by the Texas Access to Justice Commission and backed by a \$21,965 grant from the Texas Bar Foundation, plans to go into family law and volunteered her time because service plays a large role in her life. “For me, the week highlighted the need for pro bono in ways I really hadn’t seen before. Just a little of an attorney’s time can mean so much to a person.” Earlene Champion, a resident of the Sea Breeze Senior Apartments in Corpus Christi, was one such beneficiary. For quite some time she’d wanted to have a simple will drawn up but didn’t know how or even where to begin. Students worked diligently to make sure Champion understood every detail during the intake questioning, and Champion was impressed by their thoroughness. “It was a great help to me,” Champion noted. “I appreciated the opportunity to finally get it done after so long.”

For years, law students around the nation have spent their spring vacations working with legal aid offices in underserved areas, but this was the first time that a large-scale program was initiated in Texas. Nine faculty members and 49 students were sent March 10–15 to three rural legal aid locations around the state, where their efforts benefited more than 300 low-income clients. Students from Texas Tech University School of Law and Texas Wesleyan School of Law traveled to Abilene to work with Legal Aid of NorthWest Texas, assisting with pro se litigants and senior citizens and conducting clinics in rural areas of the district that seldom get direct visits from legal aid. Baylor Law School, St. Mary’s University School of Law, and the University of Texas School of Law sent students to Corpus Christi to help Texas RioGrande Legal Aid prepare wills for the elderly and identify the most notorious slumlords in that region. Students from Baylor, Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law, South Texas College of

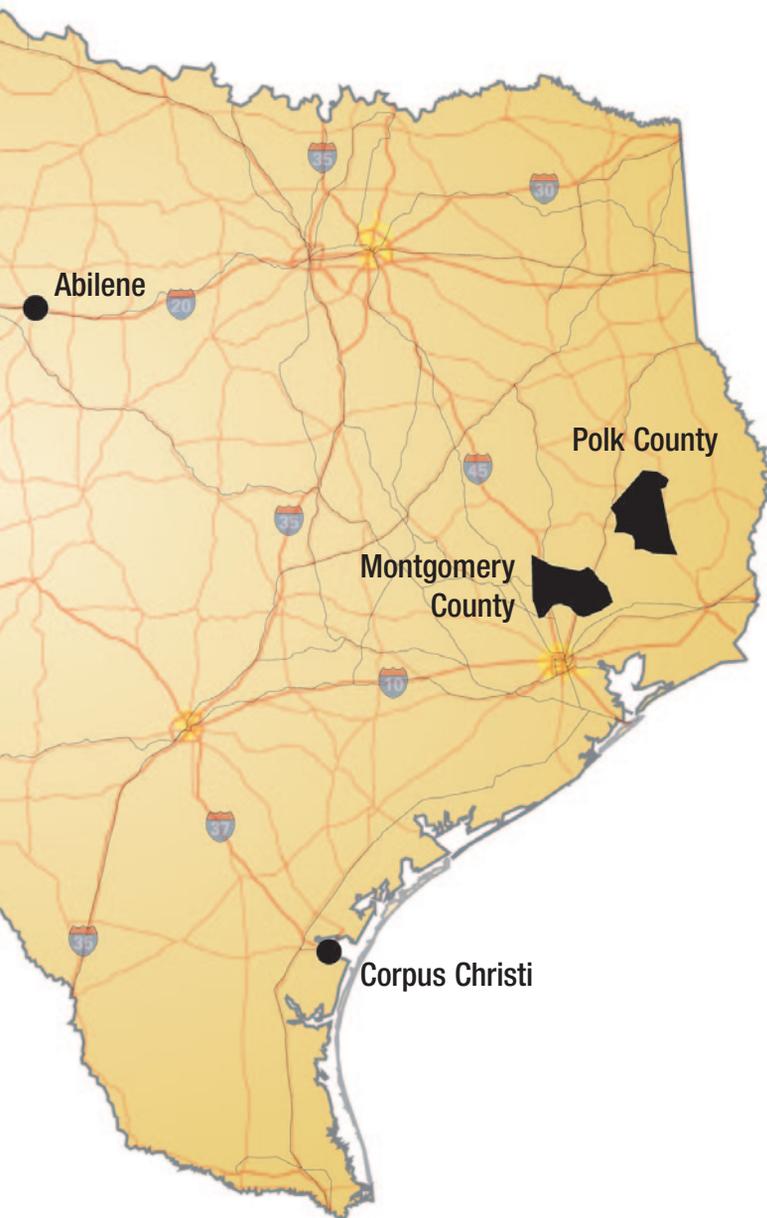
Law, and Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law spent their week in East Texas, serving Lone Star Legal Aid in its work with pro se litigants and with building a new pro se project in Polk County, as well as with outreach and assistance for Montgomery County victims of domestic violence.

“All of these were rural areas that had great need, which was the main requirement, and all three had legal aid offices to monitor the students’ work,” said Texas Access to Justice Commission Executive Director Trish McAllister. “Plus, all three were close enough to the schools that the students could get there and still have most of the week to work.” According to McAllister, most pro bono spring break programs typically involve only one law school and take only 10 or 20 students at most. “Coordinating everything was the most challenging aspect, but it all worked out beautifully,” she noted. Whatever the logistical complexities, both the students and those they served agreed that the program accomplished its mission, while also providing the students with a better understanding of the value of pro bono work.





## Texas Pro Bono Spring Break Program Locations 2013



Camesha Little, a third-year student from Texas Wesleyan whose undergraduate degree is in social work, believes the program provided a bridge from her undergraduate education to her law studies. “I’d worked with indigent people before,” Little said, “but this experience bridged the gap between my social work training and my legal training. It gave me a different perspective on what I could do with my social work training, and it gave me confidence that that training was also useful to law. They always tell you that in school, but you never really know. I

feel like now I do.” Little’s group helped legal aid attorneys sort out potential pro se divorce litigants to determine which ones would become clients. She helped draft documents, questioned the potential clients about their cases according to a prepared checklist, and helped legal aid attorneys decide which cases to take. Then, after coaching from the supervising attorney, Little took one client before the judge to present her case in an uncontested divorce proceeding—and guided her through the rest of the process to finalize the divorce. “Doing all this with a legal aid attorney watching to make sure I didn’t make mistakes, I learned about the practical application of law as opposed to theory that we learn in the classroom,” Little explained.

Gage Fender, a second-year law student at Houston’s South Texas College of Law, was attracted to the program after reading an email that was sent to the entire school to solicit applicants. “It seemed like an interesting idea, an opportunity to change gears and give back,” he recalled. “Something refreshing, something different to do over spring break. It turned out to be a nice opportunity to use my legal education to help people.” At the Montgomery County Women’s Center, Fender helped draft emergency documents, power-of-attorney directives, and the like for women who’d suffered or who feared domestic violence. “The women were quick to pick up the legal significance to these documents,” he said. “You think the law is probably too rarefied for most people, but when you get out in the world, that’s not the case. That part of it was very cool for me.” Through the practical applications of this program, Fender realized that a lawyer can help people—and enrich communities. “It’s very refreshing to use what you learned in school to actually help someone in really practical ways. And to know that you can always continue to do that with pro bono work regardless of what kind of law you go into after you’ve gotten your degree and passed the bar.”

McAllister said that the State Bar has generously agreed to fund Pro Bono Spring Break next year, so the program won’t be reliant on grant funding. At least one legal official is already hoping to participate again. Polk County Court at Law Judge Stephen Phillips, who has collaborated frequently with Lone Star Legal Aid to find representation for indigent people, admitted he wasn’t sure what to expect at first. But he changed his mind almost as soon as the students began helping litigants get their paperwork together for pro se divorces. “The students were very hands-on, and I was pleased with the level of supervision they had,” he said. “This turned out to be a great program, and I’d be glad to have it back next spring.” **TBJ**



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