Laura Newland—2009 Public Service Fellow

Laura Newland received one of the first two Public Service Fellowships awarded by the Section in the program’s inaugural year, 2009. She began her Fellowship after graduating from Georgetown University Law Center in the spring of 2009, and has been providing tax assistance to low-income seniors in the Washington, DC area through AARP’s Legal Counsel for the Elderly program. Laura recently shared her thoughts about the Fellowship and her work at AARP’s Legal Counsel for the Elderly program.

NQ: What inspired you to apply for the Tax Section’s Public Service Fellowship?

LN: During law school, I became really interested in community economic development and wealth creation for low and moderate income communities. Tax practice and tax theory are really interesting from a public service perspective, but unfortunately, there aren’t that many venues for a legal aid attorney to pursue tax in their practice—especially in this economic environment. The Public Service Fellowship seemed like a great opportunity to explore my interest in tax and connect me to practitioners and theorists through its networking opportunities.

NQ: How did you come to choose AARP’s Legal Counsel for the Elderly as your sponsoring organization?

LN: I clerked for AARP Foundation’s consumer unit during the summer after my 2L year, and one of my supervising attorneys suggested I speak with the managing attorney at Legal Counsel for the Elderly to see if they would be interested in hosting my project.

NQ: What are the types of projects on which you’re working?

LN: Currently my case load is primarily composed of real property tax foreclosure defense work, but I have also had the opportunity to work on some income tax issues including garnishments and refunds, as well as tax issues related to probate.

NQ: Can you give examples of the types of issues you deal with in providing tax assistance to low-income seniors?

LN: The vast majority of my clients are on limited fixed incomes, so any unexpected event (usually health-related crises for my clients), puts my clients in untenable financial situations that their monthly income may not necessarily reflect. This can be an issue in negotiations and litigation.

NQ: What have been your biggest challenges in the position?

LN: The biggest challenges for me have mainly related to just being a new attorney and having the confidence in myself to really advocate for my clients based on my own assessment of each individual case, rather than rely solely on someone else’s opinion. My employer has displayed trust in me from the beginning, and I have been fortunate in that I have been given tremendous opportunities as a new attorney, but I’ve really had to learn to pay attention to my reactions as I process information and to trust my instincts.

NQ: What are the most rewarding experiences you’ve had during the Fellowship?

LN: Working with clients and having control over the direction of my cases has been incredibly rewarding.

NQ: What, if any, influence has your Fellowship work had on your career plans?

LN: My Fellowship has given me the freedom to explore tax work exclusively as a legal aid attorney, which I very likely would have been otherwise unable to do. As a result, the Fellowship has given me confidence to pursue a public service career with a tax focus.

NQ: Do you have any advice for other lawyers or law students who may be interested in public service or pro bono work?

LN: I think it is really important to talk to people currently doing related work. Before I applied for this fellowship, I emailed and called people I thought I could learn from. Since tax is such a niche practice in the public service arena, I found that people were willing to spend time to talk with me about what they do, which helped give me a better sense of what I could expect and what I wanted in my practice.

NQ: You have attended several Tax Section meetings. Have they helped you in your work?

LN: The Tax Section meetings have been excellent educational and networking opportunities. It has been a great forum for meeting people doing work that I am interested in as well as an opportunity for me to learn from experienced practitioners.

NQ: Do you have any immediate plans after the Fellowship?

LN: I hope to stay with Legal Counsel for the Elderly continuing the work that I am currently doing, but that will depend on funding.