

Foreword

By Marjorie Cohn

Many politically progressive students arrive at law school expecting to work hard, learn the law, pass the bar exam, and pursue a career in which they can use their legal skills to further social justice. But, like first-year law student James Hart in the 1973 film *The Paper Chase*, many find themselves terrorized, intimidated, and overwhelmed. They encounter the Socratic Method, a culture of alienation, competition, and exorbitant debt. Students asked to recite cases are put through their paces as the rest of the class sits silent. School rankings by *U.S. News and World Report* often lead to an emphasis on faculty scholarship at the expense of effective teaching. Many students feel pressure to abandon or postpone their public interest goals in the interest of making money to pay their student debts.

In the nearly quarter of a century I have been teaching law, many of my own students have approached me with similar concerns. They often wonder how they can integrate their developing skills with their commitment to struggle for justice in the context of law school. I encourage them to raise issues of racism, sexism and homophobia in their classes and with fellow students. I also advise them to pursue internships and mentoring relationships with Guild lawyers in the community. In my criminal procedure class, we deal with issues of police misconduct and racism. In my international human rights course, we discuss human rights, U.S. foreign policy, and the frequent contradiction between the two. Many students have been re-inspired by joining the National Lawyers Guild chapter at our school, where they work with like-minded progressives to use the law as a vehicle for social change. A favorite student activity is serving as legal observers at local demonstrations.

This project provides tools to challenge and even overcome many of the obstacles law students face. It is a product of the collective work of many Guild law students around the country and the NLG law student organizer. The manual details the struggle at University of California Davis School of Law – “King Hall” (named for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.) to tackle the tuition crisis, and outlines programs for debt forgiveness. It provides strategies for working with faculty to transform legal pedagogy and radicalize law school curriculum, with courses on critical race theory, feminist legal theory, queer theory, and critical perspectives on various areas of law. Methods of increasing diversity, and anti-oppression trainings – much like those we have at the national NLG convention each year – are explained. We have successfully used these trainings at my own school. The manual includes programs for mindfulness and meditation to overcome the isolation, alienation, and depression many suffer during their tenure in law school. It also has tips for finding meaningful work in a difficult economic climate. And it contains strategies for revitalizing or forming new law school NLG chapters.

The Guild provides a supportive network for law students who wish to use the law to effect social change. The NLG Radical Law School Project is a valuable tool to help students survive and thrive in law school, and go on to pursue social justice careers. The quality of the contributions is a testament to the proud 77-year history of the National Lawyers Guild, “in the service of the people, to the end that human rights are more sacred than property interests.” Law students are some of the most dedicated members of the NLG. This invaluable resource belongs in the hands of every Guild law student.

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