How to Find a Career in the Nonprofit World

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Guest Commentary

By Hillary Mantis

You went to law school because you wanted to change the world, get involved, and make a difference. You still do — but how do you break into the world of non profits? A lot of public interest organizations don't visit law school campuses for interviews. Plus, you have loans to repay. You would like to do public interest work, but you still have to pay rent. Is this possible?

Here are some strategies:

Find the right websites: Public sector organizations often do not participate in on campus interviews, and may not be ready to hire during fall on-campus interview season. So, you may have to go to them. Where to find more information? Try the following web sites: www.Psjd.org, www.equaljusticeworks.org, www.idealista.org, and www.usajobs.gov.

Look for summer public interest funding: There are many options these days to find funding for an otherwise unpaid summer position in the public sector. It's likely that your own law school may participate in these programs, so check with your career services office. Outside organizations, such as your local bar association, may also have funding or scholarships that you can apply for — but contact them now. Many have may have fall deadlines.
Investigate post-graduate loan forgiveness. Think you can’t afford to take a permanent position in the public sector? Think again. Thanks to federal laws, if you take a qualifying post graduate position in the public sector, you may eventually be eligible for partial loan forgiveness. Research the College Cost Reduction and Access Act to learn more about it (web sites such as www.finaid.org explain the details). Many law schools also offer partial loan repayment assistance programs for their graduates who take public sector jobs — check them out.

Volunteer now: Even if you can’t find a paid summer position in a nonprofit, you may be able to volunteer during the school year, and get some experience for your resume. I have found that public sector organizations really value the experience, and demonstrated commitment to that type of work. Volunteer work can lead to meeting people, which can lead to making connections, which can lead to — you guessed it — a job.

Stuck for ideas about where to volunteer? It’s election season, so you could volunteer on a political campaign, if that interests you. Or, ask your professors who teach in areas related to nonprofit work (e.g. Family Law). Join student organizations that do pro bono projects on campus, and become a student member of your local bar association.

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