

For Veterans

Student and professor show their thanks, launching free veterans law clinics.

Law school was never part of the plan for **Joe Pilgrim, BA '13** and **JD '16**. Truth be told, neither was college. Pilgrim was an electronics technician by trade, as a private citizen and then in the Navy, doing good work for a great cause. But planned or not, he would soon find out that a much different road was in store.

“I was injured in the Navy, and they rebuilt my shoulder,” Pilgrim said. “When I got out, I went to the VA to get help, and I just wanted physical therapy. The VA turned me down, saying there was nothing wrong with me. And it made me angry. And it made me angry enough to pursue my bachelor’s and go to law school so that I could fight for vets.”

Ultimately, something wonderful sprang from that anger. Pilgrim found his purpose, and funneled all his energy into serving fellow veterans. It propelled him through his undergraduate years at Washburn, and as soon as he set foot in Washburn Law, he leapt into action.

He put in 369 hours aiding vets at Kansas Legal Services. Plus, he enlisted in the Veterans Claims course with **Professor Joe**

McKinney, BA '65 and **JD '86** — an “incredible” experience where students tackle veterans benefits appeals that, frankly, no one else will touch.

Perhaps his crowning achievement, though, was the Veterans Legal Assistance Clinic. The newest offering of the Washburn Law Clinic, the program came to life after **Associate Professor Lynette Petty, '87**, attended the National Conference on Law Clinics Serving Veterans in spring 2014. With Petty leading the charge, and Pilgrim and **Nikki Southall, '16**, taking the reins as student coordinators, things took shape quickly.

Dozens of students and faculty banded together, pulling off six clinics from fall 2014 to spring 2016. So far, the events have provided free representation to 75 qualifying veterans and family members. The only problem they’ve run into? Too *many* student volunteers.

“Lynette Petty and the rest of the faculty just supported everything we wanted to do,” said Pilgrim, one of five 2016 Law Students of the Year, per the *National Jurist*.



“We participated in the vets parade, handed out fliers, went to local businesses. There were a lot of students that were just fantastic and were willing to jump on board. The first clinic, I want to say we had upwards of 55 students.”

Like all Law Clinic programs, the mission is twofold: to allow students real experience practicing law, *and* offer free legal services to community members who need it the most. It’s a model that works. It works so well that since 1992, Petty has dedicated her career to it.

“The veterans and service members we have helped at these events have been very grateful. And our students genuinely enjoyed working with them,” Petty said, adding that professors oversee the entire process.

“The student volunteers learned to draft wills, powers of attorney, and advance directives; handled expungements; and counseled clients about making end-of-life decisions. The students expressed pride in helping the veterans and giving back to the people who have served our country in such an important way.”

Beyond providing veterans a will or living will, students are giving them *control*. Something that’s often in short supply for former military, Pilgrim said.

“I’ve had students come back to me and say, ‘I had no idea what our service members go through,’” he said, noting that vets sometimes lose their housing, family, or health while struggling with traumatic brain injury and more.

“I think when a student sees that, they’re like, ‘Oh, this isn’t like a question on a test. This is a human being that really needs help, and I can make a difference in their life.’”

Now both teacher and student are moving ahead. Petty, who’s been a part of Washburn Law since *she* was a student, will retire in June. While her exit is bittersweet, she says it’s “absolutely” easier to say goodbye, knowing that the Law Clinic and the Veterans Legal Assistance Clinic will live on.

The same goes for Pilgrim. A newly minted graduate, he intends to pursue another field (possibly securities regulation) and keep helping veterans pro bono — as his passion, not his paycheck.

“Change needs to happen nationally. I don’t have that power or authority, so I do what I can locally. I don’t want praise. What I want is what I get: the thank you and the smile, and the look on someone’s face when they know that I care — that they’re not alone.”



Vy Nguyen, JD Candidate '17, Professor John Francis, and Damon Simmons, JD '16, prepare for the Feb. 13 Veterans Clinic.

Funding the Future

Faculty from the Washburn Law Clinic created a new endowed scholarship, the Washburn Law Clinic Public Interest Scholarship, to aid students interested in pursuing a career in public interest law.

“We were concerned about the debt load students encounter upon completing law school and how these financial burdens can get in the way of following public service careers many had in mind when starting law school,” said Professor John J. Francis, co-director of the Washburn Law Clinic.

Each semester, the dean of the law school chooses a qualified student from the Law Clinic who has demonstrated a desire to pursue a career in public interest law to receive the scholarship, which can be used for tuition, books, fees, or other living expenses.

“The idea behind the scholarship was to recognize student debt can be an impediment to some career paths,” said Francis. “We want to encourage students who are inclined to work in public service to stick with it.”