Before she arrived for her first day of classes at Yale Law School, Matiangai Sirleaf ’08 had an interest in human rights law, particularly as it pertained to Africa. In 2004, following her college graduation from NYU, Sirleaf received a Fulbright Fellowship to Ghana, where she conducted research on transitional justice and earned a master’s degree in international affairs.

Her interest in human rights law grew during law school, when Sirleaf served as a student director of the Lowenstein Human Rights Clinic, Managing Editor of the Yale Journal of International Law, and student director of the Schell Center for Human Rights.

By the time she graduated from YLS, Sirleaf was firmly committed to studying and working in the field of transitional justice. Her problem was that age-old one of how to secure a job without work experience.

“Fellows have a real impact on the populations they serve and are meeting a need in the communities in which they work,” says Akua Akyea, Public Interest Director in the Law School’s Career Development Office. Often, too, the fellowships offer an entrance to organizations or positions which would otherwise be nearly impossible to access.

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Often a graduate’s work with an organization continues after the formal fellowship has ended. Even those who do not stay with their sponsoring organization frequently continue public interest work. For example, as of April 2012, of the seventy YLS graduates who have completed Arthur Liman Public Interest Fellowships, sixty-three (or 90 percent) are doing public service of some kind—government, nonprofit, or teaching.

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AIDS Advocacy
Eric A. Friedman ‘02
Bernstein Fellow
Physicians for Human Rights

Eric A. Friedman has been working on issues related to health and human rights for a decade—spending much of that time working on HIV/AIDS advocacy and issues of health care access. Now a fellow at Georgetown Law Center’s O’Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law, Friedman is working on the Joint Action and Learning Initiative on National and Global Responsibilities for Health (www.jalihealth.org). The initiative’s goal, essentially, is to develop a global health treaty that aims to reduce health inequities and is grounded in the right to health and the right’s commands of equality, accountability, and participation.

“Any role I may have in this effort—and the better health, above all, of the world’s poorest and most marginalized segments of society to which it might contribute—has its roots in the Bernstein Fellowship,” Friedman says.

Friedman credits his Bernstein fellowship as being the foundation of his career since law school. As a 3L, in fact, Friedman came “unexpectedly close” to accepting a private sector position at a law firm as public interest opportunities fell through. Instead, he was offered a Bernstein Fellowship—and the opportunity to pursue the human rights practice that had drawn him to studying law in the first place.

Friedman spent his Bernstein Fellowship year (2002–03) in the Washington, D.C., office of Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) and its newly launched AIDS campaign. “The position provided a welcome continuity from my time in the Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic in law school,” Friedman says. “There I had initiated several projects on the global AIDS crisis, including having explored possible PHR advocacy on AIDS, before it launched its campaign.”

Friedman had been drawn to AIDS advocacy work by a broader concern for poverty. “It struck me (and still does) as a particularly large and pervasive violation of people’s human rights, all the more so from the vantage point of what the U.S. could—but was failing—to do to address poverty,” Friedman says. “This concern led to my interest in Africa, and the debilitating impact of HIV/AIDS, with treatment largely unavailable (at the time), its rapid spread, and dire projections of its further growth.”

As a Bernstein Fellow, Friedman helped PHR mobilize the trust and influence of health professionals to advocate for a more robust, rights-based, public health–based U.S. response to the global AIDS pandemic. He worked on action alerts, health professional sign-on letters, fact sheets, policy briefings, reports, and helped develop PHR’s long-term approach to AIDS-related advocacy, which would come to include legislative successes.

Following that fellowship year, he remained at PHR for nearly seven more years. Much of his work during that time was spent leading a health workforce campaign, which was focused on addressing the massive shortage and inequitable distribution of health workers in Africa and globally, and other health system deficits.

That work experience, in turn, positioned Friedman for his role as an advisor to the Chief Technology Officer in the Executive Office of the President. “It’s an experience, she says, that she never would have had access to had it not been for her Heyman Fellowship.

“The fellowship allowed me to meet some of the major players in the world of telecom and Internet policy,” she says. “I was able to work with and learn from people who have been steeped in the field for 15 to 20 years.”

Dalal’s job involved working on issues of spectrum policy, cybersecurity, rights-of-way, and broadband infrastructure. “Subject matter-wise, I was able to work on a ton of different things,” Dalal continues. “People-wise, I was able to meet so many people in various parts of the government. I was given a seat at the table at meetings that, but for this fellowship, I would never have been invited to. Every day was a different day, with new challenges and new opportunities,” she says.

After the President’s 2011 State of the Union Address, for example, Dalal found herself working on a team of people planning a major speaking event for President Obama in Marquette, Michigan, home to a state-of-the-art wireless network. Rather than focusing on the importance of building roads and bridges as illustrative of the critical infrastructure that connects this country, in Marquette, Obama chose to speak about the importance of building a robust, high-speed telecommunications infrastructure to connect the country and introduced the White House’s Spectrum Plan. Dalal worked with the President’s Office on developing the story and crafting the speech—an experience that was not only professionally satisfying for Dalal, but also educational. “I honed my writing skills,” she says, “and now I feel like I can more effectively communicate information to both policy wonks and the general public.”

“The chance to work on high-profile issues for the White House was an incredible launching pad . . . it opened so many doors for me,” Dalal continues.

Following her work as a Heyman Fellow, Dalal was named a Postdoctoral Associate in Law and Google Fellow with Yale Law School’s Information Society Project. Her research and writing are focused on First Amendment issues.

In addition to valuable work experience, her fellowship, Dalal says, also provided her with a network of people with whom to consult. “Some of the people I worked with have moved on to positions in the private sector, policy shops, and academia. They continue to shape policy debate through their company’s strategic decisions, their white papers, and their academic writings, respectively. Now I have this network of people who I can turn to for ideas, feedback, and support—and that’s invaluable.”

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Eric Friedman participates in a panel at a conference on workforce migration in Ghana in 2006.

Internet Policy
Anjali Dalal ‘10
Heyman Fellow
Assistant to the Chief Technology Officer, Executive Office of the President

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Eric Friedman
Victims of Police Abuse

McGregor Smyth ‘99
Liman Fellow
The Bronx Defenders

McGregor Smyth founded the Civil Action Practice at The Bronx Defenders more than a decade ago, as a Skadden Fellow. Today, the Civil Action Practice provides comprehensive legal representation to thousands of clients on every type of legal problem, including immigration, housing, employment, public benefits, and civil rights. It is an integral part of The Bronx Defenders’ award-winning holistic model, which brings together interdisciplinary work groups combining criminal defense and civil lawyers, social workers, investigators, and family court advocates to address not just the immediate criminal or family court case, but also the host of issues that drive individuals into the system. McGregor also represents two certified classes in federal court of more than 20,000 people falsely arrested in a federal class action for violating this void statute. The solution had to be comprehensive beyond Eddie. I dug further and discovered court records of hundreds of arrests for ‘begging,’ which unquestionably pale in comparison. Thirty years later, the courts have struck down two more loitering statutes, and the NYPD has illegally arrested or charged more than 20,000 people. Thousands of police officers in nearly every precinct and command participated.

“It took eight years of litigation, multiple court orders, and five appeals to a federal court holding New York City in contempt to make them stop. In this case, we finally built a structure both for meaningful relief for the victims of these police abuses and for stopping these particular practices once and for all. After 30 years of waiting, our clients will share in a $1.5 million settlement; their records will be sealed, and a specific set of court-ordered procedures will ensure that NYPD and the District Attorneys’ Offices follow the law.”

Over the past twelve years, Smyth has represented hundreds of clients on cases ranging from administrative appeals of a denial of public benefits, to immigration removal proceedings, to drug eviction trials, to federal civil rights actions. He has also trained thousands of lawyers on effective advocacy strategies and consulted with other legal organizations about restructuring their services. “The Liman Fellowship and the continued support of the Liman Program formed an integral part of this work,” says Smyth. “It supported me during a critical stage of my career, which unquestionably pale in comparison. Thirty years later, the courts have struck down two more loitering statutes, and the NYPD has illegally arrested or charged more than 20,000 people. Thousands of police officers in nearly every precinct and command participated.”

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One program that has a significant effect on students’ decisions about whether to enter the public interest field is the Law School’s Career Options Assistance Program. Since 1989, COAP has made it easier for students to take the job of their choice—whether in a smaller firm, a nonprofit organization, public interest, government service, or academia. One of the first loan repayment programs of its kind, the program became a model for similar programs across the country. Today COAP remains one of the most generous loan repayment programs and continues to help students pursue the career that they desire, rather than the one that might be necessary to repay their loans. COAP continues to be an incredibly popular program. The Law School awarded $5,631,599 in COAP funds to 398 alumnae and 2012.

The effect that COAP can have can best be told by a story from one of its participants.

HELPING STUDENTS PURSUE THE CAREER THEY DESIRE

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Kristen Jackson ’02

What COAP Means to Me

My PATH TO LAW SCHOOL was not given. I am the first lawyer in my extended family. Ranchers and farmers on my father’s side and housekeepers and trolley car operators on my mother’s side—not attorneys—preceded me. Yet my parents’ focus on education (they were both teachers while in their religious orders) prepared me well for law school. I chose to apply to law school while working at the Legal Aid Society in East Harlem. There, I learned that law can be a tool for social justice that I am capable of using. When researching law schools, I paid special attention to financial aid—not only that provided during the three years of courses, but also following graduation. I had to pay for law school myself, and I knew I would go into public interest and that my salary likely would not cover my modest expenses and the large loan repayment I knew I would have. COAP, combined with the clinical program and stellar faculty, made Yale Law School my first and only choice.

My worst day of law school was not the day of my first final, or the first time Owen Fiss called on me in Civil Procedure. It was the day, close to graduation, when we were all corralled into a room and given a PowerPoint presentation on our law school debt and when we would start to repay it. I knew I had a lot of debt, but there was something about seeing the total, in black and white, that was shocking. I eventually talked myself off the proverbial ledge that evening, reviewing all of the COAP materials and knowing that I would have help in managing and eventually coming out from under my loans. Since then, COAP has provided me with peace of mind. I think I have been spared a lot of stress—and many grey hairs—by my knowledge that YLS has prioritized my ability to make decisions without always having to put my loan repayment concerns first. Operating without this psychic burden has allowed me the energy and clarity to engage fully in my life and work without having to have an alternate career waiting in the wings in case the debt became too weighty. I have been freed to work with my clients to face and overcome their own challenges—rather than fretting about my own loan issues, which unquestionably pale in comparison.

COAP, to be sure, is not supporting a luxurious lifestyle—I still live in $85 square feet and drive my 1997 Volkswagen—but with it I have options. I am in the process of buying my first home, made easier by my dwindling debt and my savings. And these savings, if needed, will further my public interest career. I do not doubt that even after next year—when I finish paying off my loans and no longer participate in COAP—COAP will have long-lasting effects for which I will always be grateful.

I hope that YLS will maintain and even expand upon COAP. I think that it is one of the law school’s most concrete expressions of its support for graduates’ entering and maintaining public interest careers. It goes beyond theoretical or moral support to address some of the financial barriers that prevent people from staying in public interest. It also makes YLS unique in its support for public interest work—I have never run across a loan forgiveness program as comprehensive as COAP—and surely helps to attract highly talented students who are not aiming for lucrative careers.

Kristen Jackson ’02 joined Public Counsel in Los Angeles as a Liman Fellow seven years ago and is now a senior staff attorney. She represents children in juvenile dependency, delinquency, and probation court and federal administrative and court proceedings to obtain Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. Jackson also serves as a lecturer at University of California Los Angeles School of Law, where she co-teaches an asylum clinic.
“The on-the-ground experience has already proved invaluable—from research on affordable housing to the role of technology and transparency in cities to the interplay between land-use policy and urban crime.”

Ben Gross

Yale Law School offers a number of post-graduate fellowships for alumni interested in pursuing careers in academia or in public interest law, in the United States and abroad. These highly competitive fellowships are generally awarded for full-time work for one year at a salary of about $44,000 per year. (Academic fellowships typically pay a little more than public service/public interest fellowships.) Fellowships provide a gateway to professional opportunities by allowing time for research and writing, or allow graduates to work in public interest positions with NGOs, international courts and tribunals, government agencies, and other organizations. This year, about three dozen students and recent graduates were recipients of public interest fellowships.

There is a real need for more funding for fellowships that allow law students to enter public interest work,” explains Public Interest Director Akua Akyea. “While our students are very successful in securing externally funded fellowships like Skladden or Equal Justice Works, there are simply not enough of those fellowships to accommodate our strong student interest. Because of their flexible nature, Yale Law School-funded fellowships provide an attractive alternative, by allowing students to craft their own projects and work on the issues that really matter to them.”

“Without the Robina or the Bernstein or some fellowship that enables you to get involved in human rights work it’s really just not possible to get that experience.”

Mattenang Sirleaf

Post-graduate Fellowships
Arthur Liman Public Interest Fellowship
Heyman Federal Public Service Fellowship
International Court of Justice Trainee Position
Mary A. McCarthy Memorial Fellowships in Public Interest Law
Robert L. Bernstein Fellowship in International Human Rights
Robina Foundation Human Rights Fellowships
Gruber Fellowship in Global Justice and Women’s Rights Initiative for Public Interest Law at Yale
YLS Public Interest Fellowships (YPF)
Robert M. Cover Fellowship
San Francisco Affirmative Litigation Project Fellowship
Howard M. Holtzmann Fellowships in International Dispute Resolution
Yale Information Society Project (ISP) Resident and Visiting Fellowships

For more information about fellowship opportunities available to Yale Law School graduates, visit www.law.yale.edu/fellowships.

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“A lot of the other fellowships won’t fund international fellowships—or clerkships—so the Robina really made clerking at the Court a possibility for me,” Sirleaf says. “I am very grateful for the Robina because I was able to learn a lot by working on the court—and it think my work was able to make an impact.”

As clerk to then Chief Justice Sandile Ngcobo, Sirleaf was involved with the Court’s ongoing reforms to institutionalize the role of the chief justice and that of the judiciary. Sirleaf worked in the beginning phases of the project helping to conceptualize—through policy papers, research, comparative research, and task force meetings—a judiciary branch independent from South Africa’s executive arm. She also worked on a number of high profile cases, researching issues surrounding the right to water (Mzilikazi v City of Johannesburg) and pardon power and victims’ rights (Ryan Albutt v Center for the Study of Violence and Others). In the Albutt case, Sirleaf had the chance to do in-depth research on a case that dealt with the legacy of apartheid and the truth and reconciliation committee. “Alleged perpetrators had to come in front of an amnesty committee if they were accused of committing crimes during apartheid,” Sirleaf explains. “They could plead that they were following the dictates of the apartheid state and ask for amnesty. They could meet with their victims or victims’ family and explain their role and apologize. The issue was that there were a number of people who didn’t participate in that process. And a number of them were in jail and they wanted to seek pardon from the president. The Ryan Albutt case was about how that process should play out. The question was: do victims have a right to a hearing? Do victims have any say or input if the president is considering pardoning that person? Does the victim or victim’s family have a right to be heard?”

“It was very interesting because of the history of apartheid and the Truth and Reconciliation Committee,” Sirleaf continues. “There was kind of a feeling that victims have a right to truth and the right to know what was happening with this process—the right to at least be heard. I was also fascinated by how this differed from the pardon process in the U.S.” Sirleaf’s judge wrote the opinion stating that victims were entitied to due process rights—that they should be granted the right to be heard before a presidential pardon of a perpetrator under apartheid. “I thought that was pretty revolutionary!” says Sirleaf. “The case had a really big impact and it was the highlight of my time working on the court to be so involved with the research that went into the decision.”

Today Sirleaf is continuing to build her experience with another fellowship at the Washington, D.C., law firm Cohen Milstein where she works in the pro bono international human rights practice group. Most of the cases she helps litigate involve allegations of extrajudicial killings, torture, and trafficking in countries such as Columbia, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Iraq. “We practice in a number of districts within the U.S. I’m able to get substantive litigation experience in a number of different districts with a variety of different clients. And our cases are also in different stages—remediation, revving up for trial, the appellate level, in discovery—this is helping me learn a range of different litigation skills.”

Mattenang Sirleaf also worked in South Africa as a Bernstein Fellow following her graduation from Yale Law School. As a Bernstein Fellow, Sirleaf worked with the Liberia office of the International Center for Transitional Justice, doing a comparative study of transitional justice experiences in western Africa.