

the island are pebbly and there are coconuts all around. The locals warned us very early on not to walk under coconut trees for fear of being hit by stray falling coconuts. The island houses only 900 people, living in two communities, (Jicaro and La Florida). There are no cars and one phone for the 900 people.

The heat was stifling and the work was hard. There were lots of mosquitoes and lots of big spiders. I felt a long way away from the Rialto. I had to evict a scorpion from my sleeping quarters. However, the beauty of our surroundings made going to work a pleasure and in time our bodies acclimatised to the heat. In the afternoons, we were sometimes delayed by the tropical storms that swept across the island without warning. Hurricane Michelle, which swept through Central America late last year, stopped our work for over a week as the strong winds buffeted the island.

The Projects

Education is not highly valued on the island. As there is no school, students take their classes outside with a teacher from the mainland. Our first project was to help to build a school. I helped transport bricks, cement and rocks to the island in boats, then to build the walls and the roof. One of the locals was the foreman for the project and he and other community members taught us the new skills we needed to lay bricks. By the end of our

time on the island, the school was well underway, and I was a rather clumsy but very enthusiastic apprentice bricklayer. In between manual labour activities we ran English classes for students and adults. I am not sure if my students learned more English in these classes or if I learned more Spanish!

Another major problem for the island is that one of its biggest sources of income is fishing. Every year in the Gulf of Nicoya there are less fish and consequently less income for the people. The University of Costa Rica is developing projects for people on the island for alternative income raising activities (eg, chicken raising). We dug the foundations for a chicken coup.

The Goodbye

On the day that we left, school was cancelled for the day. All of the children and their parents stood on the beach crying. They hugged us and kissed us and told us that we would always be in their hearts because of the work we had done for their community. All 15 of us loaded back into the little blue boat. As the boat left the shores of the island, the islanders held up a sign, in English "We will remember you forever". This left us with a distinct feeling of having done something worthwhile, which had made a difference.

Although my career until now did not prepare me incredibly well for my brief



CHRISTY CARRYING MATERIALS IN PREPARATION FOR 3 SOLID DAYS LAYING CEMENT

time doing manual labour, it made me realise more fully the rights and opportunities that I have as a member of the legal profession. The most that many of the teenagers can hope for is a career fishing the ever depleting resources of the Gulf. The final part of the program with Youth Challenge is to take the knowledge and experience that we have gained and to put it back into our own community. I look forward to using my skills as a lawyer and the experiences I had overseas in future work with my own community here in Melbourne.

For More information

Check out Youth Challenge's website: www.youthchallenge.com.au.

The PILCH secondment experience

Eve Stagoll, Refugee and Immigration Legal Centre, seconded to PILCH from Mallesons Stephen Jacques from November 2001 – February 2002

Many young lawyers reading this journal will be familiar with the Public Interest Law Clearing House ("PILCH") – an independent, non-profit public interest law centre and referral centre. A large number of young lawyers will also have contributed to PILCH though work done on matters referred to their firm under the PILCH Scheme. Young lawyers are

also a driving force behind the work of PILCH through the contributions they make under PILCH's solicitor secondment program.

For those readers unfamiliar with the work of PILCH, PILCH specialises in referring matters of public interest to lawyers who

are its members, who then provide legal assistance to clients of PILCH on a pro bono basis. PILCH has 33 members, including law firms, community legal centres and university law departments. PILCH also refers many matters to barristers who have volunteered to act pro bono in public interest matters.



KYLIE EVANS, CLARE JONES, EVE STAGOLL AND PHILIP LYNCH

The work of PILCH would not be possible without the young lawyers who are seconded to PILCH by member law firms. Secondees are responsible for doing much of the work at the coal face of PILCH, that is, the assessment of requests for assistance and referrals to firms and barristers. This work gives secondees the opportunity to gain experience dealing with a wide range of clients, including individuals and not-for-profit organisations, and a diversity of legal issues. Secondees also have the chance to pursue projects in which they have a particular interest, and they are also involved in every aspect of the work of PILCH.

During her secondment from February to July 2001, Paula O'Brien from Minter Ellison became involved in all aspects of the organisation. As well as referrals, she wrote and edited publications for PILCH, organised a fundraising seminar, delivered a paper on pro bono and commercial conflicts, and assisted with developing a marketing strategy. Paula says of her time at PILCH: "It was intensely rewarding to use my legal knowledge and skills to do work which benefited the community, both directly, by assisting needy, disadvantaged and marginalised clients, and indirectly, by assisting organisations which provide essential services to those people. I was particularly

heartened to see so many members of the legal profession enthusiastically accepting pro bono work and contributing to the development of a strong pro bono culture in Victoria. The small PILCH team welcomes its secondees with open arms and you are included as an essential part of a very vibrant and unique workplace".

Danielle Williams-Brennan also had a unique experience during her time at PILCH. Danielle was seconded to PILCH from Blake Dawson Waldron in April 2001 for 6 months. During that time, PILCH staff played a crucial role coordinating and assisting the legal team involved in the recent Federal Court proceedings which sought to vindicate the rights of the asylum-seekers aboard MV Tampa. "Cases like MV Tampa come up only once in a lifetime", says Danielle, "and I've learnt so much from being involved".

Philip Lynch was a secondee to PILCH from Allens Arthur Robinson in June 2001. He is now the Coordinator of the Homeless Persons Legal Clinic, which is a joint project of PILCH and the Council to Homeless Persons, and works part time at Allens Arthur Robinson (*NB: see article by Philip in this edition*). Philip believes secondments to PILCH provide a rare opportunity for a lawyer in a commercial firm to be exposed to public interest legal

practice. As he says, "Working at PILCH provided me with an excellent opportunity to use my legal skills for the promotion and protection of human rights. Practising in the public interest means using your legal training for the benefit of marginalised and disadvantaged groups and for the redress of public wrongs."

The experience that Anna Stewart obtained while on secondment to PILCH has proved very useful in her subsequent work. Anna was seconded to PILCH from August 1999 until January 2000 from Deacons. She now works as a solicitor in the construction group at Deacons. When Deacons launched its national pro bono policy in 2001, Anna was asked to take on the position of pro bono coordinator for the Melbourne office, a role that she says "adds a different and interesting dimension to daily work". With respect to her secondment, she says it was "one of the highlights of my career so far. It was invaluable in terms of gaining self confidence and becoming familiar with the legal profession as a whole. It was also great to be doing something so worthwhile and personally and professionally satisfying".

Andrew Davies agrees. He worked at PILCH on secondment from Freehills from October 2001 to February 2002. "Apart from the career benefits, it has also been a real challenge dealing with a wide variety of people in the community, including a steep learning curve in communication skills. Having a small role in improving marginalised people's access to justice is extremely rewarding".

Currently, PILCH has two solicitors on secondment from their firms, Kylie Evans from Minter Ellison, and Clare Jones from Allens Arthur Robinson.

If you would like to know more about secondments to PILCH, or your firm is interested in arranging a secondment to PILCH, please contact Co-executive Directors Emma Hunt or Samantha Burchell on **9225 6680**.