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People, Times, Law School Leadership Join to Launch South Africa Program

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How did the South African externship program start? Through a fortuitous coming together of people, the times, and Law School leadership.

In February 1996, a young AIDS activist from South Africa named Zackie Achmat came to the United States for several weeks and spent some time in Ann Arbor. Zackie was then working with the AIDS Law Project at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies at the University of the Witswatersrand (Wits) and went on to found the Treatment Action Campaign that successfully pressured the South African government to begin supplying antiviral medications to people with HIV.

I was then teaching a seminar on the public policy response to HIV in the United States, and chatted with Zackie several times. In one of our conversations, we talked about the possibility that a Michigan law student might be interested in coming over to South Africa and working with his organization.

Within a few days, a law student named Ben Cohen, who had also talked to Zackie, approached me about sponsoring him for a one-term externship. I knew Ben as a fine student and said sure, forgetting that for a law student to receive credit for a term away from the Law School, Law School regulations (and the ABA) required that a professor from the Law School visit the site of the externship during the term. When I remembered the rule, I told Ben that it would be unaffordable for the Law School to send me to South Africa just to oversee one student. Ben’s quick and determined, and he immediately suggested that we see whether additional South African organizations might want students and whether additional Michigan students might want to go. I agreed that dividing the costs of sending me over to see 10 students might be easier for the dean to swallow than bearing it for one.

The short of it is that Ben was right. I flew to South Africa during spring break of 1996, and with guidance from Heinz Klug, a former African National Congress (ANC) activist and at the time a lecturer at Wits (now a professor of law at the University of Wisconsin), I located several private human rights groups that were eager for help and willing to try our students. Returning to Ann Arbor, I found, with Ben’s help, nine other students equally eager for the opportunity. And the dean said yes.

The first year had some bumps (two students found, for example, that the job I’d lined up for them had fallen through by the time they arrived and scrambled,
Externships

Externships, the semester-long assignments at human rights, government, and other agencies for which law students receive Law School credit after fulfilling academic requirements associated with the assignments, become an enriching part of many students’ legal education. Michigan Law has ongoing externship programs with the Aire Center, a legal aid center based in London, England, that works throughout the European Union, and in South Africa. In addition, many students fashion their own externships to serve in the United States and overseas at agencies like the U.S. Department of State, Office of the U.S. Trade Representatives, U.S. Department of Commerce, Overseas Private Investment Corporation, and others.

In these essays, South African externship program founder David I. Chambers describes the early days of the program, and former extern Barbara Hou, ’06, reflects on her experiences in South Africa. Hou’s essay is based on the final report that she filed with her supervising professor and appears here with permission. Participants in the program file biweekly reports during the course of the 13-week externship and then summarize their experiences and conclusions in their final reports.