



Meet Alexis Acello



Alexis “Lexi” Acello has a passion for helping others. That passion led the 3L to the University of Arkansas School of Law and placed her on a path to become the school’s 2020-21 Pro Bono Fellow, a title that recognizes and supports students committed to pro bono service. As Pro Bono Fellow, Acello is educating, inspiring and organizing fellow students to participate in the school’s Public Service and Pro Bono (previously known as Pro Bono and Community Engagement) program, a task that includes helping organize the school’s participation in the American Bar Association’s National Pro Bono Week slated for Oct. 25-31.

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Originally from Clarksville, Acello is a 2011 graduate of the Arkansas School for Mathematics and Science in Hot Springs, and in 2018 she earned a Bachelor of Arts in political science from the Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences. She is a first-generation college graduate. Near the end of her undergraduate studies, she knew she wanted to be an advocate for people who need a voice and that law school was the best preparation for the career she desired. Her resources, however, were limited.

“When I first began thinking about going to law school, I talked myself out of it,” Acello said. “I knew I wanted to be an advocate, but I also thought that such a prestigious education was out of my financial reach. The desire strengthened during my senior year and I stubbornly landed on this mantra as I confronted financial obstacles: the country needs advocates from all backgrounds, so why not me?”

Scholarship support helps many talented students like Acello pursue careers that seem financially unattainable. She has been encouraged throughout her law school career by the generosity of others. She was the 2019-20 recipient of the Arkansas Bar Foundation’s Vincent W. Foster Jr. Scholarship. She has received several School of Law scholarships including the Mike and Billie Lax Family Scholarship, Equal Dean and Fern Nance Social Justice Endowed Scholarship, Hemmingway Family Award and James R. Van Dover Pro Bono Scholarship. The support has allowed time for her to demonstrate her passion by participating in the school’s pro bono projects.

“Lexi is an incredible role model for our law students,” said Annie Smith, associate professor of law and director of the school’s Public Service and Pro Bono program. “In a short time, she has demonstrated tremendous passion for service and a commitment to using both her talents and the law to make a meaningful impact.”

During the 2019-20 school year, Acello volunteered as the deputy ombudsman for the Washington County Jail Ombudsman Project, an effort to find alternative ways, short of expansion of the facility, to remedy overcrowding at the detention center. She



Lexi Acello, Washington County Jail Ombudsman Stan Adelman, and fellow law student Hannah Andrews (J.D. '20) at a Washington County Quorum Court meeting where they presented a report on the ombudsman project.

has participated in many one-time events including naturalization and criminal record sealing clinics. In response to the coronavirus, she helped lead an effort to collect and distribute food to more than 200 individuals through a pop-up food pantry. She worked with the Arkansas Justice Reform Coalition to provide weekly food boxes for residents of Fayetteville Housing Authority properties. By the end of her second year of law school, she had performed more than 170 hours of pro bono service.

Acello's dedication to service secured her a place in the inaugural cohort of University of Arkansas School of Law Summer Public Service Fellows in 2019. Through the fellowship, she worked directly with low-income clients to help them gain access to quality civil legal services at Fort Smith-based Center for Arkansas Legal Services.

"This position taught me that there are no 'small' areas of law," she said. "Helping someone maintain their social security benefits or keep their home when they separate from an abusive partner may not be as 'flashy' as other types of law, but they are no less important. I found immense value in helping people with the 'small' things because they are big things to the clients."

Acello's deep devotion to helping others was again recognized when Dean Margaret Sova McCabe named Acello the 2020-21 University of Arkansas School of Law Pro Bono Fellow. Each year, the dean selects one or more promising students to serve during their third year of law school. The title, along with a stipend, recognizes and supports exemplary law students committed to pro bono. Fellows encourage their peers to engage in pro bono and other forms of community service – a core obligation of practicing attorneys. Acello, along with Smith, is planning the school's National Pro Bono Week activities that include a panel of students discussing their pro bono work, moderated by Acello.

During the summer of 2020, Acello served as a law clerk for the Capital Murder Unit of the Arkansas Public Defender Commission. After she graduates in May 2021, she hopes to pursue a career in juvenile criminal defense. She plans to always build time into her professional schedule for pro bono service.

"My strongest urge is always to help," Acello said. "Engaging in pro bono work allows me to contribute to organizations and groups on the ground doing the work."