

9-1-2000

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Elizabeth M. Schneider

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Recommended Citation

Elizabeth M. Schneider, *FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE EDWARD V. SPARER PUBLIC INTEREST LAW FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM: Introduction*, 66 *Brook. L. Rev.* 147 (2017).

Available at: <https://brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu/blr/vol66/iss1/3>

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THE FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
EDWARD V. SPARER PUBLIC INTEREST LAW
FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

INTRODUCTION*

Elizabeth M. Schneider[†]

On March 3, 2000, Brooklyn Law School celebrated the Fifteenth Anniversary of the Edward V. Sparer Public Interest Law Fellowship Program (the “Sparer Program”) with a forum that featured Jim Williams, BLS ‘86, Executive Director of the National Employment Law Project (“NELP”). As founder and Chair of the Sparer Program, I want to introduce Jim’s essay, “Building on Ed Sparer’s Legacy: Redefining Legal Advocacy for Low-Income People” and place his observations in the context of Ed Sparer’s work and the Fifteenth Anniversary of the Sparer Program.

Until his death in 1983, Edward Sparer, BLS ‘59, was a pioneer in the fields of poverty and health law, and he had an inspiring career as a nationally recognized teacher, scholar, and activist. He was a founder of both the first neighborhood legal services program, Mobilization for Youth Legal Services (“MFY”), and the first national support center for legal services work, the Columbia Center on Social Welfare Policy and Law. Ed was “the intellectual architect of the legal strategy of the

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† Professor of Law, Brooklyn Law School; Chair, Edward V. Sparer Public Interest Law Fellowship Program. I want to thank the following people who worked hard to make the Fifteenth Anniversary program a success: Charles Krause, Linda Feldman, Sue Susman, Eve Cary, Stacy Caplow, Jennifer Modell, Bobbi Bullock, June Parris, Linda Harvey and many Sparer Fellows, both past and present. A Brooklyn Law School Faculty Research grant generously supported my research and writing.

welfare rights movement¹ and *Goldberg v. Kelly*.² He was also an influential scholar and advocate for health care reform and a founder of the Health Law Project at the University of Pennsylvania Law School and other important health reform organizations. At the time of his death, Ed was Professor of Law and Social Welfare at the University of Pennsylvania Law School.³ In 1999, *The American Lawyer* cited him as one of this century's most influential lawyers.⁴

Ed's work and life were animated by a commitment to law as a vehicle for social change. This led to the founding of the Sparer Program in his honor in 1985. Although I had met Ed only briefly, I knew of his work, his writing, his litigation, and his organizing. At a time when I was moving from full-time public interest litigation and advocacy to full-time law school teaching, Ed sent me a draft copy of an article that he was writing.⁵ In this article, he powerfully described the contradictions facing a law school teacher committed to law as a vehicle of social change and the institutional importance for teachers to work with law students to foster public interest commitment.⁶ His article, his example, and his work inspired me. Ed died a few months later, just as I was about to begin teaching at his alma mater, Brooklyn Law School. I felt a deep personal sense of loss, like so many others.

For me, Ed's legacy meant fostering an institutional commitment to assist students to work for justice, to train students to carry on a tradition of public interest legal

¹ Sylvia A. Law, *Some Reflections on Goldberg v. Kelly at Twenty Years*, 56 BROOK. L. REV. 805, 819 (1990). For additional commentary on Ed Sparer's important work in the welfare rights movement, see also MARTHA F. DAVIS, BRUTAL NEED: LAWYERS AND THE WELFARE RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1960-1973 (1993) [hereinafter DAVIS, BRUTAL NEED].

² 397 U.S. 254 (1970). In 1990, Brooklyn Law School honored this dimension of his work in a symposium on the Twentieth Anniversary of *Goldberg v. Kelly*. The symposium was jointly sponsored by the Sparer Fellowship Program and the *Brooklyn Law Review*. See generally Symposium, *The Legacy of Goldberg v. Kelly: A Twenty Year Perspective*, 56 BROOK. L. REV. 729 (1990).

³ In 1994, the Sparer Program commemorated the Tenth Anniversary of Ed's death with a symposium on health care. See generally Symposium, *Ensuring (E)qual(ity) Health Care for Poor Americans*, 60 BROOK. L. REV. 1 (1994).

⁴ See *The Lawyers of the Century*, THE AMERICAN LAWYER, Dec. 1999.

⁵ See Ed Sparer, *Fundamental Human Rights, Legal Entitlements, and the Social Struggle: A Friendly Critique of the Critical Legal Studies Movement*, 36 STAN. L. REV. 509 (1984).

⁶ See generally *id.*

advocacy, and to provide students with opportunities to do public interest work. In 1983, when I joined the faculty of Brooklyn Law School, there was no public interest law program. In 1985, the idea of the Sparer Program was born. Bertram Bronzaft, a 1961 alumnus of Brooklyn Law School who had worked with Ed on the *Brooklyn Law Review*, played a key role. The enthusiastic support of former Dean (now District Court Judge) David Trager was vital, as was the support of the Sparer family: Ed's wife Tanya and his son Michael, who has carried on Ed's legacy as a lawyer and public health expert. Other close friends of the Sparer family and colleagues of Ed, such as Professor Sylvia Law of New York University Law School, also played important roles. The Sparer Program was founded to carry on Ed's legacy by encouraging students to do legal work in the service of social change through grants that provided summer internships in public interest law. One of the first Sparer Fellows, Claudia Werman, BLS '88, carried on Ed's legacy by continuing his unfinished work. In the summer of 1986, she worked on health issues, which Ed had been addressing before he died, at Community Legal Services in Philadelphia, where Ed had been working. She is now doing international human rights work in Mozambique. Another Sparer Fellow alum, Janet Ginzberg, BLS '93, today continues Ed's work at Community Legal Services in Philadelphia as well.⁷

Since 1986, Brooklyn Law School has had over 230 Sparer Public Interest Law Fellows who have carried out Ed's legacy in this country and around the world. As Fellows, they have worked in legal services, legal aid offices, and other organizations on a variety of legal issues, including: civil rights, women's rights, gay and lesbian rights, Native American rights, and international human rights. We are particularly proud that many of these students have continued in public interest work after their fellowship experience. The Sparer Program has generated an enthusiastic public interest presence at Brooklyn Law School. We have helped to build a

⁷ Claudia Werman and Janet Ginzberg are only two of the many Fellows who have continued to do this work. For a list of the Fellows and their work, see Program, *Edward V. Sparer Public Interest Law Fellowship Program, 15th Anniversary Dinner*, March 3, 2000 (on file with the author) [hereinafter Program, *15th Anniversary Dinner*].

public interest community through Sparer Program informational programs, fora, and symposia. Within the law school community, we have helped to develop a loan forgiveness program, a special public interest law counseling position within the Office of Career Services, and we have worked with Brooklyn Law Students for the Public Interest ("BLSPI"), a student organization also providing summer fellowships.⁸ Looking back over the last fifteen years, I wish we could have done more to assist our students to continue public interest legal work after graduation, particularly on the issue of loan forgiveness. Yet I feel blessed by having worked with an energetic and supportive group of faculty colleagues on the Sparer Committee, a committed and enthusiastic group of students, a devoted assistant, Charles Krause, and by generous support from both former Dean Trager and current Dean Joan G. Wexler.

Developing the Sparer Program, nurturing this program and the growth of the public interest community at the Brooklyn Law School, and seeing the capacities for committed lawyering grow in our students has been one of the most gratifying aspects of my professional life. It has been *my* way of carrying on Ed Sparer's legacy. I am also pleased to know that this legacy has been important to many Sparer Fellows. Indeed, in response to our questionnaire about the impact of the program on the professional lives of our alums, we received many wonderful letters⁹ that testify to the importance of the Program in the Fellows' lives and offer helpful advice to present and future Fellows about a life working in public interest law.

Jim Williams has a special history with the Sparer Program. As a law student, Jim was very active in public interest legal work. He worked closely with me on a number of projects, as a research assistant, and in developing the Sparer Program. He graduated from Brooklyn Law School in 1986, before he could benefit from the Sparer Program because our first Sparers were awarded Fellowships that year. He has had an

⁸ BLSPI was honored by the National Association for Public Interest Law in 1992.

⁹ For excerpts from these letters, see Program, *15th Anniversary Dinner*, supra note 7.

impressive public interest career as a lawyer, advocate, and organizer.¹⁰ Now, as Executive Director of NELP, he has led the development of important advocacy work concerning low-wage workers.

Jim's essay details an important aspect of Ed's legacy—the need for public interest lawyers to have a broad understanding of advocacy. Although Ed's work is known to many for impact litigation in the welfare rights context,¹¹ he always emphasized the need for lawyers to work closely with community organizations—and to be flexible in developing a wide range of legal and advocacy strategies. Jim describes the way in which NELP has seized new opportunities for creative public interest advocacy, and I believe Ed Sparer would be proud to hear about this work. Jim's essay is a fitting tribute to Ed's legacy on this Fifteenth Anniversary of the Sparer Program.

¹⁰ See Jim Williams, *Building on Ed Sparer's Legacy: Redefining Legal Advocacy for Low-Income People*, 66 BROOK. L. REV. 153, 156-59 (2000).

¹¹ See generally DAVIS, BRUTAL NEED, *supra* note 2.

