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Mixing legal smarts with startup skills

IIT Chicago-Kent students get real-world training on being a boss and owning their own business

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When Jay-Z famously rapped, "I'm not a businessman / I'm a business man," he probably had no idea that he was summing up IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law professor Heather F. Harper's outlook on her school's Entrepreneurial Law Clinic.

Well, he was.

That's because in learning about the law of entrepreneurship, Harper's students become entrepreneurs themselves.

"We provide a real world look into law practice," Harper said. "A potential client comes to you, and as a lawyer, you need to figure out if you can take this client. That's what we're teaching our students here. And that makes all of us little entrepreneurs."

Harper is at the center of IIT Chicago-Kent's entrepreneurial law offerings. She teaches the Entrepreneurship Law class while also running the clinic, a space on Chicago-Kent's sixth floor where a small group of students meet every Monday from 4 to 6 p.m.

The clinic is structured like a law firm. Harper works in the role of managing partner and her students — typically eight in the fall and spring and six in the summer — are the associates.

Potential real-world clients approach Harper looking for legal services for their small businesses, either to help them launch it or to help them run it. Harper then splits students into pairs and has them do due diligence on the client so that they can help determine if the school's clinic will take on the client.

If they take the client, the student team assists Harper, handling various transactional

duties like writing contracts and reviewing financial documents.

When the client's matters are resolved, she assigns those students to a new client and the process begins again.

The difference between a law firm and the clinic is, of course, that Harper is not simply a lawyer. She is a professor with a stake in her students' improvement.

"We're trying to educate them on all of the competencies that it takes to be a lawyer," Harper said. "If someone comes in and misses the mark on professionalism, I'm going to tell them that."

It's an approach her students appreciate.

There's 2Ls Herschel Joseph and Odell Mitchell III, two of the six students currently in the clinic. Joseph graduated from Yeshiva University in 2010 as a political science major and now consults with Jewish nonprofits, helping them strategically plan to increase membership and identify new revenue streams.

Joseph is in the process of building his own consulting firm to work full time with Jewish nonprofit clients. Interested in becoming a lawyer since he was a boy, he chose IIT Chicago-Kent because of its writing program and because of the faculty's reputation for helping students make connections outside the classroom.

"It has definitely improved my business skills from negotiations to how I would tackle a problem in the business world," Joseph said about the clinic. "Beyond just the legal issues that may arise, the Socratic approach of how to tackle problems has really enabled me to broaden my base of knowledge and problem-solve much more successfully."

That's been Mitchell's experience, too. In 2005, he launched a



Heather F. Harper

ThirdInLine Creative, a consulting company that helps clients with creative direction, graphic design, brand identity and music production.

After seven years of running the company, he realized that he needed a legal background to help the company flourish.

"I've always done entrepreneurial-type things that usually intersect at graphic design and music," Mitchell said. "In doing those things, I've found that we were always missing the ability or knowledge to protect the work we were doing or help it grow in a safe way."

Though he did not choose IIT Chicago-Kent to join the clinic he was pleased that it was there.

"I wasn't even sure if I would be involved in it, but the existence of it spoke to the priorities that the school had," he said.

Two other Harper disciples are 3Ls Jeremy Abrams and Nick Swanson, two students who have not participated in Harper's clinic but took her class.

Abrams has been involved with startups since his sophomore year in high school 10 years ago. He started an online company called Quickmarket Publishing to publish e-books for other authors and continued working on startups even today.

His current venture is Uppd, a mobile app that lets users compete in real-world challenges over their phone. That means filming yourself doing a physical activity — a skateboarding trick, gymnastics, trying to catch marshmallows in your mouth, etc. — and challenging

other users to do it better.

He came to law school to iron the wrinkles out of his business acumen.

"I couldn't do this without law school," Abrams said about Uppd. "The surface knowledge that law school gives you to understand contracts and to understand business organizations and business planning is incredible. My past ventures that didn't really succeed were in part due to errors that I've become aware of because of law school."

Swanson runs Aleckson Insurance Agency in Mundelein with his brother since 2008. Swanson came to law school to better serve his clients and improve his skills with the legal issues he already faces.

He chose IIT Chicago-Kent because of its evening program — he works at Aleckson during the day — and was thrilled to have the opportunity to take Harper's class.

"The course gave a lot of insight into the issues that entrepreneurs deal with in establishing and growing their business," Swanson said. "So even beyond the tools it gave me to give advice to my own clients who are entrepreneurs, it also obviously gives me a lot of the tools I need as I try to grow my own business."

That is exactly the kind of student Harper had in mind when she came to IIT Chicago-Kent in 2012 and launched the clinic. Even though Abrams and Swanson did not join the clinic, they have benefited from Harper's expertise and enthusiasm about startups.

"What I'm trying to do at Chicago-Kent is a couple things," Harper said. "I'm trying to provide opportunities for our students to learn about the startup community at IIT and out in Chicago ... and give my students access to it."

"The other thing I'm trying to do is to train lawyers on issues that affect startups and (teach them) how to effectively counsel this unique and fantastic client base. The goal is to try to give our students opportunities in a growth segment in the economy in Chicago which is startups."

That's another trait Harper shares with Jay-Z: When it comes to starting a business, she's giving students the blueprint.