

Hill Internship Inspires Public Service, But the Bills Must Be Paid

Brian Thornton Wesley had a pretty good advisor when he was trying to pick his law school. He went to Oliver W. Hill Sr.

The civil rights lawyer never told him what his choice should be, but by the end of the conversation, “I knew that it was really going to be Howard University,” said Wesley, who just finished his education there.

His ties with Hill began at an early age. Wesley’s grandfather, Bill Thornton, was a founder of the Richmond Crusade for Voters. “I learned the Oliver Hill story at a young age. But it took me probably sometime in college to really grasp what had transpired and what he overcame.”

The ties continued after Wesley graduated from the University of Virginia with a degree in psychology, worked for a District of Columbia law firm in the accounting and conflicts-and-ethics departments, and started law school. Wesley spent the summer of 2007 serving an Oliver White Hill Internship, established by the Hill Foundation and funded by the Virginia Law Foundation (VLF) to continue Hill’s service to end discrimination.

The internship trains law students in civil rights and civil liberties law. Wesley served his with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s Legal Defense Fund.

The experience was rich, he said. He made weekly visits to meetings of U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee meetings, attended symposiums on the death penalty and general civil rights law, and was involved in two cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. He got to know civil rights attorneys from across the country and a Hurricane Katrina expert down the hall.

Other Hill interns have reported similarly inspiring experiences. One — Jacob T. Penrod, who now practices with Hoover Penrod PLC in Harrisonburg — wrote to the VLF, “Students lucky enough to be involved with the Oliver Hill Internship Program should come away from the experience with a better understanding of how lawyers are in a unique position to transform society for the better.”

Most of the interns ended up in private practice, and Wesley is planning to do the same thing. “You have to find some income to pay the bills ... even if your heart is screaming at you that you want to improve civil rights,” he said.

He plans to go back to U.Va. to earn a master’s degree in business administration, and go into practice with his father, Ronald R. Wesley, a lawyer in Richmond.

The Virginia Law Foundation is tracking Hill interns to see where they end up, but board member Monica T. Monday concedes that paying student loans takes precedence for many. “It is certainly the hope of the ... board members and staff that students will be inspired by this work to pursue careers in the public service,” she said. But “for some of the students, it’s not possible to go into public service with the kind of debt load they have,” she said.

The VLF also is looking at whether it can play a role in debt forgiveness programs to encourage public interest law. “It may be that there is a larger role for the Virginia Law Foundation,” Monday said.



Wesley