Tobias Levy Receives Sixth Annual Swarthmore College Cahn Law and Social Justice Award

Tobias B. Levy, a December 2016 graduate of Swarthmore College with a major in political science, received the sixth annual PBA Swarthmore College Edgar and Jean Camper Cahn Law and Social Justice Award on Nov. 29. Levy was honored by the PBA Legal Services to the Public Committee and Pro Bono Office for his work with attorney Gregg Volz of EducationWorks supporting youth courts.

Levy first became interested in youth courts when he took Professor Ben Berger’s Democratic Theory and Practice course in 2013. He volunteered in a fifth grade youth court in Stetser Elementary School in Chester, Pa., that year.

Levy was awarded a Chester fellowship from the Eugene Lange Center for Civic and Social Responsibility in the summer of 2014. That summer he helped train youth court students in Camden, N.J., and Philadelphia. Levy’s primary work was assisting the revision of the Youth Court Coordinator’s Manual which is now used in youth courts throughout the Philadelphia region and across Pennsylvania.

In the fall of 2015, Levy served an internship in Vice President Joe Biden’s office and submitted a public policy proposal for youth courts. Levy, along with several other Swarthmore College students, is currently writing a vision paper on youth courts for the Lang Center at the College. The paper will include a history of youth court participation by Swarthmore College students and the Chester Youth Court volunteer student organization the Swarthmore students formed in 2010. The history will include input from former Swarthmore College students who have supported the youth court initiative since 2005.

Levy’s career objectives include attending law school. He hopes to continue supporting youth courts after he leaves Swarthmore College, whether he continues to live in the Philadelphia region or moves elsewhere.

Edgar Cahn joined PBA President-elect Sharon Lopez in presenting the award to Levy. The Cahn award is given to a Swarthmore College student or alumnus whose work advances youth court and whose character typifies the values demonstrated by Jean and Edgar Cahn.

Youth courts provide an alternative disposition for young people, either in school settings or beyond, who have committed an act that violates the norms of a school or the community. Some youth courts are tied to school discipline matters, others prevent juvenile offenders from further penetrating the justice system. There are effective models that combine school and community justice youth courts, with the school providing the training and early experience before veterans of these courts graduate to work in the juvenile justice system youth courts. Students as young as elementary school age have participated in school-based courts. Research by Philadelphia’s Research For Action on the youth courts supported by Swarthmore College students demonstrated multiple benefits to both student offenders and the K-12 students who run the youth courts. Student empowerment, civic engagement and familiarity with the law are all achieved through youth courts.

The first Chester youth court was founded at Chester High School in 2007 by Gregg Volz, a longtime public interest lawyer and now head of the Youth Court Support Center at EducationWorks, to provide students with a non-punitive alternative to suspension. Youth courts in Chester are entirely student-run,
with students taking roles found in an actual courtroom such as lawyers, bailiffs, clerks, judges - and jurors. The youth court students sentence their peers but the purpose is not to suspend or expel but to help the student get back on track. Volz credits the 2007 PBA Children’s Summit as the impetus to get his work underway and thanks the PBA for its ongoing support.

Levy is the sixth Edgar and Jean Camper Cahn Law and Social Justice Award recipient. The award celebrates his commitment, and that of the award’s namesakes, to social justice. The Cahn’s met at Swarthmore where Edgar graduated in 1956 and Jean in 1957, the year they married. They then both attended Yale Law School and devoted their careers not to personal gain but to improving the lives of others. Their lives are a testament to the values Swarthmore College teaches, the PBA promotes, and America was founded on opportunity and equality for all and a fair chance in the race of life.

Jean Camper Cahn was born into a family of social activists. Her father, Dr. John E. T. Camper, a Baltimore physician, was a founder of the first chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in that city, where Jean was born and reared. Regular visitors to the home included Thurgood Marshall, who was to become the first black Justice of the United States Supreme Court, and the singer Paul Robeson, who was her godfather.

Jean and Edgar, reared in a family tracing its lineage back seven generations of rabbis and lawyers, were early soldiers in the War on Poverty. The Cahns were champions for the poor and worked as a team until her death in 1991. In 1963, they jointly wrote “The War on Poverty: A Civilian Perspective” which was published in the Yale Law Journal and became the blueprint for the National Legal Services program. It remains one of the ten most cited articles ever published in the Yale Law Journal. It asserted that a War on Poverty meant little if poor people have no access to legal representation. Sargent Shriver read that article and agreed with the Cahn’s. Using their model and working closely with Shriver and the Johnson administration, Edgar and Jean co-created the National Legal Services program under the Office of Economic Opportunity.

In 1972, Edgar and Jean founded the Antioch School of Law, which later became the UDC David A. Clarke School of Law and continues the tradition emphasizing social justice as a critical role for the law. As law school deans, Edgar and Jean were the first pioneers of clinical legal education in the US, an approach now found in law schools throughout the nation. Cahn also created Time Dollars and is the founder of TimeBanks USA. In 1996, Cahn founded the Time Dollar Youth Court, whose mission is to use youth as resources to reduce juvenile crime. Sanctioned by the DC Superior Court, the Time Dollar Youth Court is among the largest youth courts in the nation processing more than 400 youth each year, and preventing them from further contact with the justice system. The Washington, D.C. Time Dollar Youth Court served as one model for the youth courts in Chester and Philadelphia.

In the summer of 2009, Swarthmore College students working with Volz on the Chester youth courts researched Time Dollars and two students attended a seminar in Madison, Wisconsin in which Cahn was the keynote speaker. In 2010 two Chester youth court members testified before PA hearings on juvenile justice due to Edgar’s determination that those committees needed to hear youth describe the power of youth courts. That fall Edgar was brought to campus by the Chester Youth Court Volunteers to discuss his work and the following year he was a featured presenter at youth court hearings held by the Philadelphia City Council.

The PBA Board of Governors and House of Delegates passed a resolution supporting efforts to expand youth courts statewide at its Annual Meeting in 2011. Youth courts have been promoted through the Philadelphia branch of Physicians for Social Responsibility which views youth courts as an antidote to violence in our schools and communities and through the Pennsylvania Council for the Social Studies which sees youth courts as a great opportunity for civic education and engagement. Youth courts are
more than a preferred disciplinary system to end the school-to-prison pipeline. They are a hands-on application of civics which provide academic and socialization benefits to youth. They allow youth to co-produce, a term created by Cahn, to support their school climate. Toby Levy, through his leadership at Swarthmore College, has made a significant contribution to the youth court model. He is a worthy recipient of this award.

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