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Shilpa Boppana Receives Inaugural Swarthmore College Edgar and Jean Camper Cahn Law and Social Justice Award

Shilpa Boppana, a 2011 graduate of Swarthmore College, received the inaugural Swarthmore College Edgar and Jean Camper Cahn Law and Social Justice Award on May 29, 2011. Boppana was honored by the Legal Services to the Public Committee and the Pro Bono Office of the Pennsylvania Bar Association for her work at the college supporting youth courts in the Chester Upland schools. The terms youth court, teen court, and peer court are used interchangeably. Their purpose is to 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 work with juvenile offenders in the justice system. There are also effective models that combine school and community justice youth courts, with the school providing the training and the early experience before veterans of these school-based youth court students move on to work in the juvenile justice system youth courts. Students as young as elementary school age have participated in school based courts. Depending on their structure, training and support, youth courts of significant variety have been shown effective for reducing recidivism among respondents in both school and community justice settings and for reducing delinquency among the active participants serving on the youth court. All young people involved, whether respondents or court members, show improved citizenship skills, dispositions and knowledge.

Boppana's interest in youth court programs began in junior high school when she started serving as a youth court volunteer in her hometown of Vestavia Hills, Alabama. At Swarthmore College, she interned with the founder of the Chester youth court program, Greg Volz, as a Chester Fellow and then took on the challenge of supporting the youth court at Chester's Smedley Allied Health High School that culminated in the establishment at the college of Chester Youth Court, a campus chartered group that will help develop and expand Chester's youth courts in the years ahead.

"Our group hopes to serve as a resource for Chester students by working with them to build skills, provide information about higher education, and support their ideas to strengthen their program and help their peers," said Boppana, a religion and psychology major who will be teaching abroad next year under a Fulbright Scholarship, upon the creation of the college youth court group. "My hope is that the Swarthmore group will build a strong institutional relationship between the College and youth court programs in Chester and that it will contribute to a discussion about the 'school to prison pipeline' and other racial justice and juvenile justice issues."

The first of what now are six Chester youth courts was founded at Chester High School in 2007 by Volz, a longtime public interest lawyer, in order to provide students there with a constructive alternative to suspension and to reduce disciplinary issues within the school. The court, like all of the Chester youth courts, is entirely student-run, with students taking roles that can be found in an actual courtroom such as lawyers, bailiffs, clerks, judges - and jurors. The youth court students sentence their peers but the purpose of the sentence is not to suspend or expel but to help the student get back on track instead of punishing them. Volz credits the 2007 PBA Children's Summit as the impetus to get his work underway.

Boppana was given the first Edgar and Jean Camper Cahn Law and Social Justice Award to both celebrate her 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.

Jean Camper Cahn was born into a family of social activists. Her father, Dr. John E. T. Camper, a physician in Baltimore, was a founder of the first chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in that city, where she 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. She and her husband, Dr. Edgar S. Cahn, from a family tracing back seven generations of rabbis and lawyers, attended law school at Yale and were early soldiers in the War on Poverty. The Cahns were champions together for the poor and unrepresented 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. The article basically said 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 his late wife created and founded the Antioch School of Law, which later became the UDC David A. Clarke School of Law and continues the tradition established in the Antioch days to emphasize 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 which is now to be found in law schools throughout the nation.

Cahn is the creator of Time Dollars and the founder of TimeBanks USA. The development of Time Dollars is just one achievement in a career that, since the early 1960's, has been dedicated to achieving social justice for the disenfranchised. In 1996, Cahn founded the Time Dollar Youth Court, whose mission is to enlist youth in changing the shape of juvenile justice in DC. Sanctioned by the DC Superior Court, the Time Dollar Youth Court is now among the largest youth courts in the nation. Its innovative design enlists more than 400 youth each year, the majority of them former delinquents, as active shapers of a new form of justice for DC youth. The Washington, D.C. Time Dollar Youth Court served as one of the models for the youth courts in Chester and through Cahn's networking two of the Chester youth court students testified before the Pennsylvania General Assembly last summer.

In the summer of 2009 several Swarthmore College students working with Volz on the Chester youth courts researched the the Time Dollar concept and two of the students attended a seminar in Madison, Wisconsin at which Cahn was a keynote speaker. That is where award winner Bopanna first met Cahn. Her Chester Youth group at the college also brought the legal scholar and lifelong advocate of using the law to achieve social justice goals to the college campus last year to discuss his experience with the Time Dollar Youth Court in Washington, D.C., which Cahn founded and currently directs. Bopanna was with him again at the Swarthmore College graduation when Cahn presented her with the first of what will be an annual award.

Volz, among the group celebrating Bopanna, waxed eloquently about Cahn: "For many years I have looked on this man as an inspiration. He used his extraordinary brilliance and compassion to help other human beings, instead of pursuing individual gain and profit. It is wonderful that both the PBA and Swarthmore College have now chosen to recognize him and his wife, along with the wonderful work Shilpa Bopanna has done, and thru that recognition inspire future generations of Swarthmore College students."

Bopanna's award reflects a network of partnerships that is a model for public service. The Pennsylvania Bar Association has championed Youth Courts for years; Volz first connected with the PBA by attending the 2007 Children's Summit where then PBA President Ken Horoho and Bedford County District Attorney (then PBA Young Lawyer Chair) William Higgins highlighted youth courts as a juvenile justice alternative. Supported by a Stoneleigh Fellowship, Volz has expanded his youth court efforts in partnership with the Pennsylvania Coalition for Representative Democracy, (PennCORD), the civics education outreach of Third Circuit Judge and former Pennsylvania First Lady Midge Rendell that was founded by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the National Constitution Center and the PBA. Youth courts were featured this spring in the PBA Lawyer Magazine and at the PBA's Statewide Pro Bono Conference. The PBA Board of Governors and House of Delegates recently passed a

resolution supporting efforts to expand youth courts statewide at its Annual Meeting in early May. Judge Rendell, along with the Stoneleigh Foundation, will be hosting a statewide youth court planning meeting at the National Constitution Center under PBA auspices in June. Youth courts have also been promoted through the Philadelphia regional branch of Physicians for Social Responsibility which views youth courts as a wonderful antidote to the epidemic of 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.

Below are photos from the event.



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