Jasmin Rodriguez-Schroeder will become the 7th annual recipient of the Pennsylvania Bar Association and Swarthmore College Edgar and Jean Camper Cahn Law and Social Justice Award at a 1 p.m. presentation at Parrish Hall immediately following the 2017 commencement. This award honors the Swarthmore College student who has contributed the most to Chester City youth courts. Youth courts transform at-risk youth into active contributors to a better school culture. The award is given to the college student who has promoted citizen participation consistent with the philosophy, scholarship and careers of famed public interest lawyers, Edgar and Jean Camper Cahn.

The Cahns met at Swarthmore College 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 Pennsylvania Bar Association promotes, and America was founded on: opportunity and equality for all and, a fair chance in the race of life. These are the values for which Jasmin is being honored.

After graduating from Yale Law School (where Edgar also earned a Ph.D. in English) the couple co-authored a seminal law journal article challenging prevailing ideas of how to end poverty. The Cahns wrote that if the recipients of anti-poverty services did not directly participate in those programs, the war on poverty would fail. To participate meaningfully, the Cahns believed that the poor needed access to lawyers. The article led to the creation of the first legal services programs and eventually the creation in 1974 of the Legal Services Corporation which has provided legal aid to 50 million citizens since its inception. (See the War on Poverty: A Civilian Perspective, 73 YALE LAW JOURNAL 1317 (1964).

Among many accomplishments, the Cahns founded Antioch Law School in 1972 which was the first law school in the nation to promote clinical training as part of a law school curriculum. Their public service careers typify the same dedication to social justice first articulated and lived by legendary Swarthmore College founder Lucretia Mott. The Cahn Award perpetuates the memory of Swarthmore College figures who best promote the school’s values of equality, inclusivity and freedom.

In addition to the 2017 Cahn Award, Jasmin also received a 2015 Chester Fellowship. This allowed her to contribute to a wide range of youth court support activities. She drafted new sections of the youth court manual and edited most of the rest. She researched restorative justice as a more logical way to deal with student misbehavior caused by trauma. She participated in meetings with professionals from the fields of law, higher education, philanthropy, and other fields. She laid the groundwork for a major celebration at the National Constitution Center in 2015 honoring Edgar Cahn with a lifetime achievement award. Jasmin led the Swarthmore College Chester Youth Court Volunteer organization, and helped the Eugene Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility restructure how to best support Swarthmore College students working in Chester youth courts.

Jasmin earned a 3.8 Grade Point Average at Swarthmore College and a double major in Art History and Peace and Conflict Studies. She was a member of Delta Phi Alpha, the German Honors Society. An accomplished cello player, she participated in the Swarthmore College
Orchestra, played in a chamber music group, and has a fine singing voice. She worked in the campus art gallery and as an Admissions Fellow in the summer of 2016 and last fall.

Jasmin is grateful to have been part of the Swarthmore College community for the past four years. Her youth court service has familiarized her with public education, conditions in resource-poor schools and neighborhoods, and the impact youth courts can have on them. She will integrate this knowledge into her approach towards art history and museum education. She has accepted an internship with the Metropolitan Museum of Art this summer.

The first Chester youth court was founded at Chester High School in 2007 by Gregg Volz, a longtime public interest lawyer now promoting youth courts at the Community College of Philadelphia, 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 a positive 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.

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.

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 by such varied groups as the Philadelphia branch of Physicians for Social Responsibility which views youth courts as an antidote to violence in our schools and communities and 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. Jasmin Rodriguez-Schroeder, through her leadership at Swarthmore College, has made a significant contribution to the youth court model. She is a worthy recipient of this award.