Jennifer Kaur Koch Receives Third Annual Swarthmore College Edgar and Jean Camper Cahn Law and Social Justice Award

Jennifer Kaur Koch, a 2013 graduate of Swarthmore College, received the third annual Swarthmore College Edgar and Jean Camper Cahn Law and Social Justice Award on Sunday, June 1, 2013. She was honored by the Legal Services to the Public Committee and the Pro Bono Office of the Pennsylvania Bar Association for her work supporting high school student run youth courts which are gaining popularity in the Chester Upland and Philadelphia schools. Koch responded to her recognition by noting, “I can barely begin to express how rewarding and valuable my time spent with high school students in youth courts truly was. I have come to care dearly for many Chester Youth Court students, am so proud of their accomplishments, and cannot wait to see the program grow and become even stronger in the future.”

David Trevaskis, Pennsylvania Bar Association Pro Bono Coordinator, and Gregg Volz, Regional Youth Court Support Center Director at EducationWorks, presented the award to Koch. Koch is one of the original four charter members of Chester Youth Court Volunteers, a campus chartered group of Swarthmore students helping to train Chester students to run youth courts. Koch was a Project Pericles Scholar with Swarthmore’s Eugene Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility working with youth courts and has worked with Chester youth courts for four years. She maintained student support through a difficult period in Chester.

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. The Swarthmore College Lang Center provides fellowships to students who help develop Chester youth courts. Trevaskis remarked: “Jenny Koch is a bright follower of the call to public service exemplified by the Cahns in their legendary public interest careers.” Volz added: “The Chester schools have faced many challenges and Jenny’s success in maintaining support for youth courts is worthy of recognition!”

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. Recent research by Philadelphia’s Research For Action demonstrated multiple benefits to both student offenders and the 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 Volz, a longtime public interest lawyer, 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.

Koch’s persistence led to her selection as the third Edgar and Jean Camper Cahn Law and Social Justice recipient. The award celebrates 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. 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.

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. In the fall Edgar was brought to campus by the Chester Youth Court Volunteers to discuss his work. Last 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. Jennifer Kaur Koch, through her leadership at Swarthmore College, has made a significant contribution to the youth court model. She is a worthy recipient of this award.