Sofia Saiyed Receives Swarthmore College Edgar and Jean Camper Cahn Law and Social Justice Award

Sofia Saiyed, a 2010 graduate of Swarthmore College, received the second annual Swarthmore College Edgar and Jean Camper Cahn Law and Social Justice Award on May 18, 2012. She 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 and Philadelphia schools.

David Trevaskis, Pro Bono Coordinator of the Pennsylvania Bar Association, presented Saiyed with the award at the 2012 Youth Court Day celebration at Chester Upland School District’s Science and Discovery High School. Joining Trevaskis in honoring Saiyed were Swarthmore College’s Deborah Kardon-Brown, Stoneleigh Foundation Fellow Gregg Volz and Chester Youth Court alums Brian Foster and Jamar Saunders. Current students and other alums of the Chester Youth Courts cheered Saiyed as she was surprised with the award.

Saiyed has been working with Chester Youth Court since she was at Swarthmore. She helped train six different groups of students in the Chester-Upland School District. This past year, as an Americorps member through EducationWorks, Saiyed helped Philadelphia's Bartram High School start their first youth court. She inserted restorative justice principles into a youth court coordinator's manual she helped draft and which is being used throughout Pennsylvania. As Volz noted, “Ms. Saiyed successfully gains the confidence of students and inspires them to contribute to the youth court process. In this way the values of fairness and justice become the paramount objectives of youth court. These same values were promoted by the Cahns in their legendary public interest careers and are still examined today at Swarthmore College.”

The Cahn award is given to a Swarthmore College student or alumnus whose work advances youth court and is consistent with the values lawyers and Swarthmore College alums Jean Camper and Edgar Cahn demonstrated in their long public interest careers. Swarthmore College promotes service to others which is the function of the Eugene Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility where Kardon-Brown works and which houses the Chester Youth Court, a campus chartered group of current Swarthmore students that is dedicated to helping develop and expand Chester’s youth courts.

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.

The first Chester youth court 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. Youth courts in Chester are 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.

Saiyed was given the second 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. The 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 in 2010 to discuss his experience with the Time Dollar Youth Court in Washington, D.C., which Cahn founded and currently directs.

Saiyed’s work with youth courts was supported through EducationWorks, a not-for-profit organization that provides comprehensive support for economically disadvantaged communities in Philadelphia, Chester, PA; and Camden and Trenton, NJ. whose goal is to provide educational programs and services that enrich the lives of children, youth and families confronting high rates of poverty and other barriers to educational achievement. She served two terms as an EducationWorks AmeriCorps member, the third EW AmeriCorps member to support youth courts since 2009.

Saiyed’s award reflects a network of partnerships including EducationWorks that is a model for public service. Swarthmore College provided the base for her initial involvement with youth courts. 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 have been featured in the PBA Lawyer Magazine and at the PBA’s Statewide Pro Bono Conference. 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 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.