

Spotlight On Teaching: HLS's Child Advocacy Program transcends disciplinary boundaries



Daniel Heimpel, founder of Fostering Media Connections and HLS Professor Elizabeth Bartholet '65, director of the Child Advocacy Program at HLS

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When Harvard Law School Professor [Elizabeth Bartholet](#) '65 and [Jessica Budnitz](#) '01, HLS lecturer on law founded the Child Advocacy Program at Harvard Law School over eight years ago, they intended the program to serve as a model for other law schools. They intended the program to educate law students about the importance of working across traditional disciplinary lines. But they did not expect their ideas to transcend those boundaries by inspiring action within another discipline, namely journalism.

Yet this is exactly what happened. Inspired by CAP's policy course on social change, centered on presentations by practitioners in the world of child advocacy, a California-based journalist and nonprofit director decided to teach his own version of the class. He has already taught the class for two semesters on two different campuses, and is gearing up to expand the program further.

Journalism for Social Change

Daniel Heimpel is a journalist with an unconventional philosophy. Journalists should not be neutral in the traditional sense, he believes, but should advocate for solutions and social change by bringing their own knowledge and values to bear on their reporting. In 2010, he founded a nonprofit called Fostering Media Connections, which works to harness media to create political will for policy improving the well being of children in foster care.

Because of his work, Heimpel was invited in the fall of 2011 to speak at CAP's Art of Social Change: Child Welfare, Education and Juvenile Justice. He was struck by how committed the students were to child advocacy and the experience sparked an idea.

"What if we could take that concept and use it as a cudgel of social change by virtue of solutions-based journalism?," he wondered. "We could do this but add a component where students were contributing work that would actually enter the public discourse."

That winter, he began laying the groundwork for a similar course that would look at issues in child advocacy through a journalism lens. He applied for foundation support, and approached administrators at the University of California at Berkeley.

In the spring of 2012, he taught the course for the first time at Berkeley, as "Journalism for Social Change." This spring he is teaching the second iteration of the course at Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy and the University of Southern California's Sol Price School of Public Policy Simultaneously. In the fall, another instructor and like-minded journalist will teach an undergraduate version of Journalism for Social Change at San Francisco State University.



Fostering Media Connections summer fellows Orville Thomas (Goldman School of Public Policy) and Stephanie Ludwig (University of California Berkeley School of Social Welfare) reporting in Sacramento

Bartholet, Harvard Law School's Morris Wasserstein Public Interest Professor of Law and faculty director of CAP, said Heimpel's project is exciting and important to the overall goal of making the world better for children.

"There's really a need for the profound kind of change that you're only going to get if you reach a broad swath of the population, and media is key to that," she said.

The Art of Social Change

The Art of Social Change: Child Welfare, Education and Juvenile Justice was born in 2005 as a policy course within the Child Advocacy Program (which began in 2004). Bartholet and Budnitz, a lecturer on law and managing director of CAP, started the program with a view toward influencing other law schools by showing that Harvard Law School believed child advocacy was important, and that advocacy should be broadly defined. At the time, Budnitz said, other schools did have programs focused on children's rights, but they were fairly limited and typically focused on representing children in court. Budnitz and Bartholet hoped to encourage students to think about child advocacy more broadly than work in the courtroom, and to consider alternate approaches, including legislative advocacy, grassroots organizing, using social science research, working inside the system in administrative roles and using of art and media.



HLS Professor Elizabeth Bartholet, director of the Child Advocacy Program, moderates a panel discussion with Chris Gaines, Mary Flannery, and Michael Gregory

“Children are, by definition, perhaps the most defenseless and weak and in need of help, of all disempowered groups. They are the ones who are often too young even to say what they think, or demonstrate on the streets.” Bartholet said. “You have to think about how you are educating [students] to accomplish major policy change, and that means action beyond the courtroom.”

To that end, Budnitz and Bartholet seek to achieve three main goals in the Art of Social Change course, which typically enrolls 80 to 100 students. First, the co-teachers aim to expose students to specific issues in the field of child advocacy, tackling a different topic each

week. This past fall, the course covered substance abuse and child maltreatment, bullying in schools, early childhood education, child prostitution, juvenile life without parole and others. Second, they aim to encourage students to think in sophisticated ways about the possible solutions and strategies for addressing these problems. Last, they hope students reflect on their place in the world of child advocacy – on the wide range of roles they might play in their future careers.

“The course is such a unique, rare opportunity for students,” said Budnitz. “When in life do you have a chance to sit and listen to leading experts talking about their work? And it’s compelling work—the speakers are really passionate and committed to the work they’re doing.”

Budnitz and Bartholet strive to bring in experts with very different substantive perspectives and approaches to social change. For example, during one class session focused on schools in juvenile facilities, the speakers included David Domenici, the co-founder of a highly praised model school in a juvenile facility in Washington, D.C., Jason Szanyi '09, a young lawyer working on juvenile justice reform (who had taken Art of Social Change while at HLS himself), and Christine Kenney, Director of Educational Services, Massachusetts Department of Youth Services. The goal of such a session, Budnitz said, is to expose both the students and speakers to fresh ideas. In addition, she said, they also strive to bring in younger social entrepreneurs in order to provide students with a range of role models.

“This course really reinforced my belief that taking a multidisciplinary approach is really important...especially when you’re working with kids,” said Emily Kernan '07, who took the course the first year it was offered and now works at Advocates for Children in New York City. “[They] have so many problems and they’re developing so quickly that you can’t tackle them in isolation.”

For Szanyi, returning to the Art of Social Change as a speaker helped him appreciate how important the course was to his trajectory. He came into law school with a very narrow idea of what he wanted to do, he said, but the course exposed him to the range of possible approaches within child advocacy, and he ended up doing something quite different.

Heimpel's version of the course seeks to achieve many of the same goals as the Art of Social Change. He tries to call attention to the substantive issues as well as encourage students to consider how policy and journalism may provide or contribute to practical solutions. His classes contain an array of students studying journalism, public policy, and social work. And because of his years working in the field, Heimpel was able to bring in a number of high-level speakers – including Bartholet herself. Throughout the semester, his students produce journalism in a variety of styles, which are eventually published online.

This model could flourish elsewhere, Heimpel believes, and he hopes it will produce more and more journalists who subscribe to his philosophy and aim to contribute to social change for children and youth. Many experts have a hard time communicating their ideas, he said, and journalists can play a critical role in disseminating information and arguments.

“I would like to see us populating other campuses with other teachers who are dedicated to this kind of work, teachers and journalists who understand that their job is not to report on the end of the world but to use their skills to improve it,” he said.

—*Divya Subrahmanyam*

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