Linking startups to students

John Marshall’s BELAW program helps pedicab operator navigate murky waters

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Douglas Cahanin had a problem.

A second-year student at The John Marshall Law School, Cahanin was realizing — as so many law school students do — that he was headed toward an uncertain future.

He had already decided to distinguish himself from future tives regulation when professor Michael D. Schlesinger spoke in front of Cahanin’s corporations class.

The subject of the speech? John Marshall’s Business Enterprise Law Clinic, known as BELAW.

This was a chance for Cahanin to gain, as he put it, “practical experience working with clients on real matters.”

That meant helping a small business owner, Robert Ashmore, navigate the murky waters of Chicago’s unregulated pedicab market.

For Schlesinger, BELAW’s work on pedicabs was another in a long line of projects. For Ashmore, it was an effective way to start his business.

And for Cahanin, who graduated in January and is working as a legal intern at Eris Exchange LLC, it was the opportunity of a lifetime.

He joined as soon as he could.

The professor

After 40 years practicing law, Schlesinger wanted a change.

In 2011, the longtime business and transactional law attorney at Robbins, Salomon & Patt Ltd. who had been working at John Marshall since 2004 as an adjunct professor left his law job to teach full-time.

It was then that he launched BELAW.

“Our mission is to provide pro bono business and transactional legal services to individuals and businesses that are starting up or growing businesses that have limited financial resources that makes it difficult or impossible to engage legal counsel,” Schlesinger said. “We concentrate on underserved, low- and moderate-income communities.”

Each semester, the clinic generally enrolls 15 students and represents 25 to 30 clients. Students work in groups of two under the supervision of business and transactional lawyers, known as faculty supervisors.

“These are lawyers around the city that supervise matters that students are working on,” Schlesinger said. “Every piece of advice that’s given and work product submitted to a client is approved by a faculty supervisor.”

Once the students are selected, Schlesinger leads the task of finding their clients.

“We do screening interviews of people who are interested,” Schlesinger said. “And then those individuals get on our list.”

Schlesinger works as one of the faculty supervisors, while also charting the clinic’s course and promoting it to business and political leaders throughout the city.

“We’re interested in creation and retention of jobs and overall positive impact on the communities where we direct our efforts,” Schlesinger said.

“We do that through community outreach efforts. Our entire program is based on community outreach in underserved communities. I speak before chambers of commerce, agencies of government that sponsor economic development, attended business expos … and I talk about the pro bono legal services that we provide.”

The clinic has had a positive impact on Schlesinger as well.

“It’s the opportunity to teach at a law school, to work with law students, to really encourage them or inspire them to engage in pro bono legal services throughout their careers and to see law students develop and gain confidence and graduate law school with a solid foundation in being a business and transactional lawyer;” Schlesinger said.

The businessman

In 2012, BELAW caught the eye of Ashmore, a prospective pedicab owner and operator. After graduating from Michigan State in 2003, Ashmore spent five years traveling the globe as a concert roadie. During his time in Europe, he became accustomed to bike riding, a practice he took up when he returned to Chicago and moved to Logan Square.

It was in Logan Square in 2012 where he met a Dubliner named Niall Cahill. Cahill operated a pedicab in Dublin.

“He planted the idea of having pedicabs in Logan on Milwaukee (Avenue),” Ashmore said. “That kind of connected with me, because I had picked up a normal bike and been riding in the city again and got comfortable with getting around really quick.”

Always the innovator, Ashmore decided to start a pedicab operation of his own — a fleet of six cabs. He needed legal help to structure the business.

“I was looking for some legal document creation,” he said. “I was a small startup, so I was trying to do it as cheap as possible.”

He was introduced to BELAW through a friend who had already worked with the clinic. A spot opened, and after the screening was complete, Ashmore was in.

But a surprise surfaced as the students worked on his case: They realized pedicabs were not regulated in Chicago.

“There were already pedicabs, but they were mainly in the tourism areas,” said Ashmore. He felt that the lack of regulation left Chicago’s pedicab business vulnerable to price gouging, uninsured drivers and unfair competition from out-of-staters.

Wanting a legitimate business, Ashmore and the BELAW students got involved in the city’s longstanding pedicab debate.

The students eventually wrote a white paper called “Wheelin’ Round Town: Pedicabs Are Here to Stay,” which they presented to aldermen working on legislation, specifically 44th Ward Ald. Toni Preckwinkle.

With the help of the students, Ashmore launched Roadie Cab in March of this year. He knows the road to an official Chicago pedicab ordinance will be a long one, but he is happy with his business and pleased that he worked with BELAW.

“Those guys could have told me anything during the process and I would have considered it,” Ashmore said about the students. “They helped me set up everything. So for me (the excitement) was being around that college, creative, intellectual environment.”

“Even though it’s law and a little stuffy, it was a fun project to work with them on. And I really liked connecting with Michael too, a longtime Logan
Square resident. Just hearing the passion in his voice and the acknowledgement that what I was doing for the community was good.”

**The student**

Last summer, two months after Ashmore launched Roadie Cab, the BELAW students began working on their Chicago pedicab white paper. Along with Schlesinger and adjunct professor Kevin M. Hull of Hull Partners Ltd., the paper was produced by six students: Blaise Bennett, Kelly Flesch, Denise Sakuta, Kayleigh Thomas, Melissa Webster and Cahanin.

“Professor Schlesinger contacted us shortly after (first) semester ended, right when the summer was starting,” Cahanin said. “He reached out to people who were going to be in the BELAW program asking if they had any time or wanted to get involved in some matters that they needed to work on over the summer.

“I didn’t have much going on last summer. I was looking for a way to get involved and get some experience, and I offered to get involved in any projects they had going on.”

Since Bennett, Flesch, Sakuta, and Thomas were graduating, Cahanin and Webster picked up the slack on the pedicab white paper. The 22-page document detailed pedicab ordinances in other major American cities and compared their circumstances to those in Chicago.

“We did a report and positioned ourselves as impartial,” Schlesinger said.

“The purpose of this report is to inform pedicab owners, the city aldermen who are going to vote on this and the public of how the proposed Chicago ordinance compared with other ordinances around the country and to make recommendations of what in our view would improve the ordinance based on that,” he said.

For Cahanin, his BELAW stint is already paying off.

“I think the biggest thing is the experience and the confidence that comes along with experience in meeting with clients and talking with clients about the issues that they have. Without BELAW, I would be going through all this for the very first time right now, and that’s scary,” Cahanin said.

“Having that confidence and having done most of these things already, I feel much more comfortable dealing with clients after graduation.”

Robert Ashmore, seen here in the Logan Square neighborhood, sought guidance from The John Marshall Law School’s Business Enterprise Law Clinic, known as BELAW, to jump-start his pedicab business, Roadie Cab. BELAW links startups and growing companies to law students, providing pro bono business and transactional legal services. Casey Block photography