

# Global Internship has a profound influence on Monash Law student

By Amy Burton

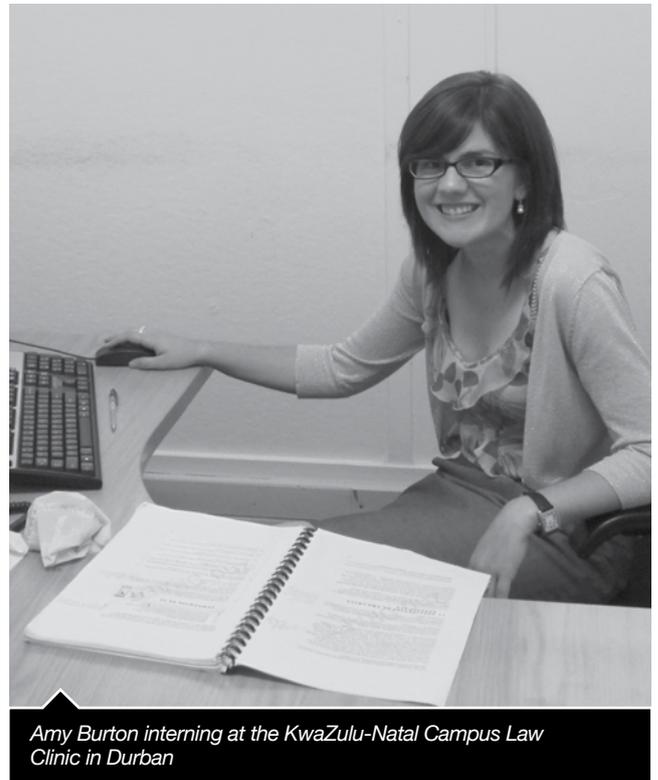
I arrived in South Africa on the cusp of the FIFA World Cup, an event which ironically provided much fodder for discussion about the country's human rights issues. Conversations – with anyone from my internship supervisors, to clients, cleaners, and even the local barista – frequently commenced with the question “What do you think of Durban's new Moses Mabhida Stadium?”. I didn't encounter a South African who wasn't disheartened that \$US450 million had been invested in the construction of a new football stadium, rather than being used towards the improvement of access to housing or healthcare.

After an intensive HIV/AIDS training program at Monash South Africa, I commenced a five-week internship at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Campus Law Clinic in Durban. The Clinic provides free legal services to “the poorest of the poor”, focusing mainly on HIV/AIDS issues, family law, and employment disputes. As one of the Clinic's first international interns, I was exposed to an almost dizzying range of work. On the first morning, my supervisor asked my opinion on a case concerning the intentional infection of an individual with HIV/AIDS. By the end of the first week I was attending court hearings; actively participating in case management meetings; and independently conducting client interviews, often in a mixture of English and very limited Zulu.

My main project during the internship was to develop and implement strategies to improve access to justice. ‘Access to justice’, however, takes on an entirely different meaning in South Africa. The Clinic had a waiting list of almost three months, with each lawyer juggling approximately 50 clients. Every potential client had to satisfy a detailed means test. Sometimes individuals surviving on the equivalent of \$50 per month had to be rejected; they still didn't fit below the required financial threshold. In addition, each day dozens of people would arrive at the clinic – sometimes lining up for an hour before we opened – pleading for a lawyer to attend to their urgent matter. One of my hardest roles was having to sit down with people who had legitimately urgent claims, and explain that we simply didn't have the resources to help them straight away.

Attending the Clinic's Outreach Centre at the Umlazi township was a truly confronting experience. Each time we drove to the centre – serviced three times a week by one lawyer – I came face to face with the deep-rooted socio-economic issues facing South Africa. Within 10 minutes of leaving the affluent University campus, we passed rows of decaying shipping containers serving as supermarkets and hair salons; women balancing huge buckets of water on their heads; and hoards of workers crammed into the back of utes. Once at the outreach centre, we were usually greeted by a room full of young mothers – some as young as 13 years old, and many who were HIV positive – seeking legal advice which mainly concerned domestic violence, or maintenance disputes.

On one occasion I was asked to accompany the outreach lawyer to the Umlazi township court. Every person stared at me, the only white foreigner present, as I joined the end of the queue of almost 100 litigants waiting to be seen by the Magistrate. It was the most humbling and yet frustrating experience of my life to stand among the almost entirely legally unrepresented crowd, and learn after three



Amy Burton interning at the KwaZulu-Natal Campus Law Clinic in Durban

hours of waiting, that the Magistrate was actually sick that day and wouldn't be hearing any matters. Many people continued to sit and wait, unsure of what alternative they had.

No textbook could have adequately prepared me for these experiences, and the many others I encountered in South Africa. It is a country layered with complexity. It has an advanced legal system, with an extensive Bill of Rights, incorporating rights to shelter, and to food. The people are some of the most welcoming, open and patriotic I have ever met. And the cultural diversity, and natural environment is immensely rich and unique. Yet, at the same time the level of poverty, crime, violence, disunity and division, is significant and saddening. Laws which should protect the vulnerable often seem to do the very opposite.

Without question, the Castan Centre Global Internship has confirmed my commitment to human rights law. My experience in South Africa has had a more profound effect on my future aspirations as a lawyer than I could have anticipated. I've never felt more challenged, confused and yet deeply inspired, than I did during my two months there. I truly believe that South Africa is a country with much potential. There are many grassroots organisations committed to furthering human rights throughout the country, and I hope to spend more time working with such organisations in the future. I cannot thank the Castan Centre enough for providing me with this invaluable and unforgettable opportunity.