SCHOLARSHIPS FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD
(and the Good of the School)
After completing his first year at Vermont Law, E. William Tucker plans to spend this summer in South Africa working with UNICEF to bring a model of his Atlanta-based environmental education program to schoolchildren in that country.

It was during his undergraduate days at Morehouse College that William saw a disconnect between underprivileged communities and the environment, which led him to start Creyahtion (pronounced “creation”). Founded in 2007, the nonprofit organization’s initial efforts were aimed at recycling, but the program has grown to include a wide range of sustainability efforts aimed at encouraging urban youth to join what he calls “the green movement.”

With the program’s demonstrated success, William has been searching for ways to expand the reach of Creyahtion, yet the chance to travel to South Africa might not have been realized without the benefit of his VLS scholarship.

“This is an opportunity that I probably wouldn’t have been able to grab hold of if I had to focus on getting a job that was going to pay me this summer,” says William, who began his career as a sixth-grade earth science teacher. “Giving back to the community is more rewarding than the paycheck I would receive. I truly am thankful for this opportunity and plan to do the most with it.”

Ben Jones, also completing his first year at VLS, credits his scholarship for allowing him the option to choose VLS over its Canadian rivals. Ben had been living in northern British Columbia and the Yukon for nearly a decade, working as a bush pilot and developing educational programs for first nation students. For reasons of both cost and convenience, it made sense for him to attend law school closer to home. He had already been accepted at a top Canadian law school and offered a scholarship there when he visited the VLS campus in spring 2009. He met with Kathy Hartman, associate dean for enrollment, who arranged for his tour of the campus and meetings with professors.

“I was extremely impressed. I was almost disappointed, because I didn’t want to uproot myself again and come to the states,” he says. With a dialect that reveals his native England, Ben explains that after returning from graduate work in Belgium, he was originally planning to stay settled in Canada for law school.

“As a pilot, I moved around an awful lot, so I was looking forward to sitting tight on the west coast for a little while. But when I compared the two law schools, I thought VLS was the better fit for me. It certainly offered more in the way of environmental law programs, and it seemed like a very dynamic place.”

“The school has a real sense of purpose—people coming together to achieve something,” Ben says. So at 37, he traded a career flying de Havilland Beaver float planes for a three-year commitment to study environmental law, which he finds “intellectually stimulating and satisfying.”

“Without the scholarship, it would have been impossible for me to come here,” he says. He notes that the aid will also allow him to attend summer sessions for a dual JD/MELP degree.

YIELDING THE BEST FOR VLS

Both William and Ben are among a group of first-year students who have been awarded the first of VLS’s Public Citizen Scholarships. In addition to strong academic backgrounds, the scholarship recognizes a broad range of endeavors that recipients have taken on before attending law school, backgrounds that fit well with the VLS philosophy.

“These are people who have already demonstrated their commitment to public citizenship. We do not put any requirements on them. There are no specific strings attached,” says Dean Hartman. “We are in a way thanking them and acknowledging them for the public service they have already done.”

Vermont Law School has long considered the varied backgrounds of its applicants as part of the admissions process, but with the class of 2012, the public citizen piece was made a little more formal. These scholarships are among a range of financial offerings that make it possible for students not
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—Ben Jones JD’12, scholarship recipient

“Were striving to attract the best and the brightest, and those who have a commitment to and passion for advocacy,” she explains.

Dean Jeff Shields notes that merit scholarships are just one of many forms of assistance offered at VLS, including the needs-based Loan Repayment Assistance Program (LRAP) awards that help support students who commit to public service after graduation. And he notes that students who are awarded scholarships tend to bring more than just strong LSAT scores with them.

“What we have found is that often those who receive various scholarships greatly enrich the life of the school for all of our students. It elevates the game for everybody in terms of the level of discussion in class. These are people who turn out to be the leaders on campus and bring other students along,” he says. “We have to be creative in the ways we attract students. Offering these scholarships is just one component, but it’s an important component.”

CHOOSING PUBLIC CITIZENSHIP

Scholarships not only make law school possible for many students, they provide students with the financial flexibility to pursue their varied legal interests rather than being constrained by the pressures of finding higher-paying jobs.

As an undergraduate at Gettysburg College, Katie Amestoy JD’11 spent a year studying European politics in Copenhagen. After graduation, she headed to Brussels to research issues for the U.S. delegation in the European Parliament. Having grown up in Vermont (her father served as chief justice of the Vermont Supreme Court), she wasn’t sure it would be her choice for law school after being surrounded by the cultures of large European cities. Yet she was impressed by the VLS recruitment efforts, which she describes as detail-oriented, organized, and targeted.

“I thought it was really personal. It was the only school where I really felt wanted,” she says. She was further impressed by questions on the application. One such question asked her to define how she viewed her role in the global community, which meant something to a young woman whose interests leaned toward international human rights work.

“I remember being struck by the fact that the questions were a little outside the norm of what I was being asked by other law schools,” she says.

When she visited the VLS campus, she was also consider- ing a “nice offer” from Penn State and a few other options. In the end, she was surprised by how much she liked the school and the quaint charms of South Royalton. A scholarship offer would also play a critical part in her decision-making.

“Having the financial support was very reassuring in an economy that is so uncertain. I feel less overwhelmed by loans,” she says. Katie spent her spring semester serving as a judicial intern in Washington County Superior Court, where the sitting judge proved a valuable mentor. A 2L Student Bar Association senator, she is also staff editor on the Vermont Law Review—opportunities that she says might have not been possible without the scholarship aid. “It’s supporting my entire law school education,” she says.

While she was initially focused on international human rights, she now thinks business law might be her future path. She’ll spend the summer exploring that path in the Burlington office of Primerer Piper Eggleston & Cramer. “It keeps changing as I keep on learning new things. It’s entirely possible that I could graduate with an entirely different focus,” she says with a laugh. But whatever course she ultimately takes, she still plans to stay involved in international human rights work, most likely through pro bono work. “There is a real opportunity to effect change in everything from international to environmental policy through business law. A lot of the positive changes in the future will be originating in the business field. I’m excited to be part of this evolution.”

A scholarship has enabled Patrick Munson JD/MELP’99 to take advantage of research opportunities that have included two trips to China. “International travel is not cheap. It helped

only to attend law school but to choose VLS among a host of options. They also allow students to pursue research and internship opportunities that otherwise might be off-limits due to financial strains.

In any given year, VLS offers upward of $2 million in scholarship assistance to incoming students, ranging from small awards to full tuition. Many of the scholarships follow students through their three years of studies as long as they keep up their GPA. In the last eight years, only one student has lost a scholarship for not doing so.

The most recent snapshot of the VLS student enrollment, as reported to the American Bar Association, showed that of a total of 512 students enrolled, 290 (52.5 percent) were receiving some form of scholarship or grant assistance. However, the per- centage drops significantly, to under 5 percent, for scholarships that cover at least half of the total tuition (26 of 552 students). It is a percentage that Dean Hartman would like to see grow.

Scholarships are considered a key tool in recruitment. For entering classes in a typical year, 22 to 24 percent of VLS scholarship offers that are extended are accepted. That number spiked with the entering class in 2009, for reasons related to a combination of factors: the economic downturn, the law school’s top-ranked environmental law program, and a strong outreach effort.

Along with the higher-than-average scholarship accep- tance rate came a significant achievement: The class of 2012 averaged one of the highest GPAs for an entering class in VLS history, at 3.32, with an average LSAT score of 155. Dean Hartman says the VLS trend toward stronger scores and merit scholarship offerings reflects what is happening at law schools nationwide. With ever-growing competition among law schools, the national shift has moved from need-based to merit scholarship offerings reflects what is happening at law schools nationwide. With ever-growing competition among law schools, the national shift has moved from need-based to merit scholarship offerings reflects what is happening at law schools nationwide. With ever-growing competition among law schools, the national shift has moved from need-based to merit scholarship offerings reflects what is happening at law schools nationwide. With ever-growing competition among law schools, the national shift has moved from need-based to merit scholarship offerings reflects what is happening at law schools nationwide.
me with the decision to stay in China for two extra weeks,” he says of his most recent visit. Moreover, the scholarship has relieved much of the debt load he will be faced with when he graduates, thus allowing him to accept a one-year clerkship with a state trial court in Anchorage after graduation.

“I might not have had that option if I thought I had to jump on my career path right away,” he says. “It allows people like me to feel they can go ahead and take public service jobs even though they don’t pay as much.”

For Munson, the scholarship also proved a key factor in determining whether to choose VLS over a close competitor. He was living in Oregon when he made the decision to study environmental law, and his two choices were to stay close by and attend Lewis and Clark or relocate for VLS. He had been accepted to both schools, but the scholarship offer came with the acceptance letter from VLS.

“The offer really did help make the decision a lot easier,” he says of the short-lived quandary. “In that sense, it definitely did make the difference.”

Like Munson, third-year JD/MELP student Anna Ellis has found that her scholarship provided great opportunities related to her legal pursuits.

Last winter, she attended the climate change talks in Copenhagen with a group of VLS students and professors. She was able to travel to China following a VLS summer course that explored its environmental laws. While there, she met with environmental ministers and NGO leaders and toured the massive Three Gorges Dam hydroelectric project.

Her scholarship also allowed her to take a summer internship in Alaska with Earthjustice, an environmental NGO (and helped with the sting of a $900 plane ticket). “The scholarship has significantly eased my mind in terms of not saying ‘no’ to opportunities that have come along. I have definitely done things that were not cheap and that I would have had to think twice about if I had been going to take all of the money out of my own pocket,” says Anna, who graduated from Tulane University in 1998 and worked with her brother in a small fam-

ily business before traveling to Kenya to work with a forestry NGO in 2005.

Christie Popp JD’05 was serving with AmeriCorps in her first year after college when she and her then-boyfriend (now husband) took a vacation to Vermont and Quebec and paid a visit to the VLS campus along the way.

“I was intrigued by the public interest and the environmental focus. We stopped in South Royalton and it was just so quaint. It felt perfect for me at that point in my life,” she recalls. Coming from what she describes as a low-income background with her father working in a factory, she was the only person on her father’s side of her family at the time to have achieved a four-year college degree.

At Indiana University in Bloomington, she majored in Latin American Studies with a minor in Spanish. When she was accepted at VLS, she was greatly relieved to learn she was being offered a scholarship.

“I knew when I went into law school that I wanted to go into public interest law. I knew I would be incurring a lot of debt,” she says. “When I went to law school, the scholarship was enough that I didn’t feel I had to work to pay my expenses. I was able to concentrate on my studies without having to worry about a ridiculous amount of debt.” Christie is now a staff attorney at Indiana Legal Services, Immigrants’ and Language Rights Center, where she practices immigration law. Among other things, she helps victims of crime and domestic violence in obtaining benefits, and represents clients in immigration proceedings. Even with the scholarship help, she says her law school loans still amount “to a very large portion of my salary.”

“People go to Vermont Law School because they are public-interest motivated, or at least a vast majority are. On the other hand, tuition is expensive. For people who come from slightly different circumstances and who are motivated to help others, a scholarship in that case can really help us fulfill our dreams,” she says. “It sounds hokey, and I might sound classist, but I think people who grow up with money take for granted the benefits that come with that. Scholarships tend to even the playing field.”