



THE  **VIEW**

A PUBLICATION OF VISTA DEL MAR CHILD & FAMILY SERVICES
REISS-DAVIS CHILD STUDY CENTER JULIA ANN SINGER CENTER
HOME-SAFE FAMILY SERVICE OF SANTA MONICA

Law Class Helps Vista Youth Navigate Life

New program helps teens transition to adulthood with real-life advice

After years of specializing in juvenile dependency law, it was clear to Laura Dym Cohen that many young people needed help understanding the system and finding resources to get their lives together. Extra help was even more crucial for youth who did not have parental support and guidance. So Cohen created a course based on Street Law curriculum to teach critical law-related life skills, including one-on-one counseling to help teenagers make the transition to adulthood.

The 10-week course, Street Law Youth in Transition, is taught at Vista once a week by two law students from Southwestern Law School. During a semester-long seminar at the law school, Cohen prepares law students to go out and teach the course at agencies and schools in the Los Angeles area. For this innovative work, she was the 2007 recipient of Street Law, Inc.'s Educator of the Year award. She is also a co-chair for the Juvenile Court Task Force, assisting with legal issues that involve youth and the Juvenile Court system in Los Angeles. She also helped create a program for the Alliance for Children's Rights to educate and assist former foster youth with legal problems after they "age out" of the system.

In addition to learning about the court system, students are taught many practical life skills. "We teach consumer law, such as how to understand contracts," says Cohen. "Kids sign up for cell phones or gym memberships and experience all kinds of problems. They learn what documents they need to have for life and some basic information, like how to use a checking account and how a credit card works. Some kids know these things but many don't."

The law students show the kids how to fill out financial aid forms and find out what grants and scholarships they are eligible for.

Since first piloting the project at Vista a few years ago, Cohen has continually adapted the curriculum based on kids' needs. "I wanted to be their resource connection, to help them get their lives on track in a positive way, to connect youth to people and programs in the community that can help them too" she explains. She realized that teaching the course was not enough. "When I was only teaching the class, I was just one

more person coming in and out of their lives, so I asked Vista if it would be okay to meet with the kids individually, to find out what they want and need so I could get them the information. There are different issues one-on-one."

So personal mentoring was incorporated into the course. "Now the law students meet individually with their students to be sure they have transition plans in place," says Cohen. The kids are given useful general information, such as what to do if they're arrested, how many credits they need to graduate, and tenant rights when they sign their first lease. The law students provide them with resources on housing, employment, and education, such as community college programs and financial aid. The law students have helped many individual students; in one case, they helped a student petition for citizenship. They also helped a student win a \$1000 scholarship and another connect to a family member they had lost contact with; another was accepted into a transitional housing program that offered the student continued support.

Knowing that many kids who are involved in the juvenile system don't understand it, Cohen makes sure that all young people who are court involved receive contact information in their resource binders so they can call their court appointed lawyers with questions about their cases.

"Some of them don't know how to contact their lawyers or have information on their cases, their next court dates, or what happened in court," she says. "There has been a high turnover in the courts and some of our students have been in the system a long time; others have severe learning disabilities." So Cohen filed a motion with the juvenile court and was able to access the names of the kids' court-appointed attorneys, and if they are eligible, their ILP transitional coordinators. "We're not here to be their lawyers but to get them resources and information. We try to help them figure out what their next step should be."

"We teach consumer law, such as how to understand contracts. Kids sign up for cell phones or gym memberships and experience all kinds of problems. They learn what documents they need to have for life and some basic information, like how to use a checking account and how a credit card works. Some kids know these things but many don't."

— Laura Dym Cohen
Street Law Youth in Transition,
Coordinator

