Retreat aims to inspire law students

By Maria Kantzavelos
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The group yoga session scheduled for 7 a.m. on Saturday is optional for some 60 or so law students from around the Midwest who will be rising that morning at a retreat center in Woodstock for a day packed with practical tips and inspiration from leaders in the area of public interest law.

And, while networking with peers and public interest leaders at the 10th annual Norman Amaker Public Interest Law Retreat this weekend is also an option for students, the formalities of suits and resumes are not exactly in the vein of a relaxed getaway Friday through Sunday that aims to promote principles of service and to invigorate a next generation of socially conscious lawyers.

"There's going to be a lot of floor-sitting. It's going to be jeans and T-shirts; very casual. I have no intention of bringing a suit whatsoever," said Eleana T. Lindsey, a third-year student at Loyola University Chicago School of Law who is serving as the chairwoman of the retreat's planning committee.

"It [the retreat] will help students grow their networks, but it's not a bring-your-resume, get-hired kind of event," Lindsey said. "It'll be a time to get to know these leaders in a more intimate, personal kind of setting and focus on how you can make the same impact with your career."

Loyola Chicago's law school is playing host for the first time to this year's public interest law retreat that is named in honor of the law school's late professor Norman C. Amaker, a "trailblazer in the Civil Rights movement," who in the 1960s represented thousands of protest demonstrators across the South, including Martin Luther King Jr. in Birmingham and Selma, Ala., said Loyola Chicago clinical law professor Emily Benfer.

Benfer is serving as the faculty adviser overseeing the student organizers of this weekend's retreat.

The theme of the retreat, which is sponsored in part by the Society of American Law Teachers and takes students out of the law school setting and into a secluded environment at Loyola's Resurrection Retreat Center, is "Building Public Interest Leaders to Overcome Social Injustice."

"Social justice and public interest law are incredibly challenging fields. They challenge you on an emotional level, an intellectual level and an endurance level," Benfer said. "It's our hope that these impassioned messages and stories and accounts and lessons will remind students of their own journey and the reasons why they cannot wait to get back to this important justice work."

The annual event for law students with a drive for working in the public interest sector was previously held at Indiana University in Indianapolis and had been on a two-year hiatus, until Loyola was asked in late October 2010 to revive it this year.
Organizers had to act fast, Lindsey said.

"For about a month and a half we were looking for a site," she said. "We didn't actually invite students until the first week of February."

Still, organizers said they are expecting about 60 law students from 10 different schools to participate in the retreat, which features workshops and group discussions led by some big names in the public interest law arena.

The agenda includes a workshop led by John M. Bouman, longtime president of the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, and Rene Heyback, founder of the Law Project of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, on the topic of homelessness and poverty law and "Meeting Clients Where They Are."

Another session, on "Civil Rights Lawyering in the 21st Century," features University of Chicago Law School clinical professor Randolph N. Stone, an expert in criminal and juvenile justice; and Rita Aliese Fry, a former Cook County public defender, on the issue of "Disparate Impact the Criminal Justice System has on People of Color."

On Saturday night, students will hear about peace and social change from featured speaker Florence Wagman Roisman, a professor at Indiana University School of Law who is a leader in housing rights and "one of my personal heroes," Benfer said.

Benfer, who attended the retreat when she was a law student, said the event is a chance for students to interact with lawyers and professors who might provide practical guidance and mentorship and serve as role models for students who are "so eager to embark on public service careers."

It's also a forum for thinking about reform, change and the growth of public interest law and social change, Benfer said.

And, Benfer said, the retreat is an opportunity for students to "break isolation."

"There are students from all around the Midwest who have common concerns, goals and interests," Benfer said. "This is an opportunity to get to know one another and to realize the national scope of the social problems that they personally seek to rectify."

For Lindsey, who intends to focus her career in the area of child law, either through direct representation or policy work on behalf of children, the timing of the retreat is perfect.

"The whole idea is to get away from the law school environment that kind of bogs you down by February and meet with the people who are doing this work right now and reinvigorate so that you can keep moving forward with the same passion," Lindsey said.

Drew McCormick, a Loyola 3L who expects to join McGuireWoods as an associate in the health-care department, said she helped organize a "skills-focused" session on the topic of "Health Law Medical-Legal Partnership Spotlight: How to Collaborate Across Disciplines and
Gather Support for Your Cause." That session is to include panelist Kevin C. Lichtenberg, the director of Intake and Client Advocacy for the Health Justice Project at Loyola Chicago's Beazley Institute for Health Law and Policy.

McCormick, who said she was looking forward to making some new connections with student peers from around the Midwest and with professionals already immersed in public interest law careers, also helped organize some of the social events on tap for this weekend's retreat. They include an ice-breaker game "we've been calling speed dating, but obviously it's completely platonic," McCormick said.

"We're going to have people in partners and give them a set amount of time to figure out the most interesting thing they have in common," she said. "I think there's going to be a little competition to see who has discovered the most interesting connection. We're going to award a prize for the most interesting commonality."