

Women's Prison Project at Tulane wins prestigious Gumpert Award

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Katherine Mattes, left, director of the Criminal Justice Clinic, and Becki Kondkar, director of the Domestic Violence Clinic, are working together with Tulane Law students to assist women who were victims of domestic violence as they seek justice decades after their convictions. The Women's Prison Project is a joint effort between the two clinics. (Photo by Tracie Morris Schaefer)

The Women's Prison Project – an innovative Tulane University Law School clinical program providing legal services and advocacy for imprisoned women who were

victims of domestic violence – has won the prestigious Emil Gumpert Award.

The award, [the highest honor](#) conferred by the American College of Trial Lawyers on a single organization annually, recognizes programs whose principal purpose is to maintain and improve the administration of justice. It comes with a \$100,000 grant.

“We’re grateful to the American College of Trial Lawyers for this very significant recognition and support,” said David Meyer, dean of Tulane Law School. “The Women’s Prison Project is an innovative and important extension of Tulane’s proud leadership in clinical service and education, and its work has only grown more urgent in the current crisis.”

[The Women’s Prison Project](#) is a first-of-its-kind collaboration between Tulane’s Domestic Violence and Criminal Justice clinics and focuses on providing legal representation to domestic violence survivors charged or imprisoned after killing an abuser or for having committed crimes under an abuser’s coercion or duress. Clinic students receive hands-on legal training, and the women receive representation on their legal cases as well as their parole or clemency hearings.

“This award presents an opportunity to shed light on an issue few people even know about,” said Tulane Domestic Violence Clinic Director Becki Kondkar. “Too many incarcerated women continue to serve long or life sentences for killing abusive partners, often decades ago and long before our societal understandings of domestic violence evolved into what they are today. Their decades of incarceration has rendered them invisible – now it’s both necessary and urgent that we bring their stories back into the public consciousness.”

The \$100,000 grant will create an inaugural Access to Justice Fellow at Tulane who would spend 18 months dedicated to expanding access to justice to imprisoned women. The Fellow would expand the WPP’s current reach by creating a model how-to program — developing a practice manual, training modules, and a social science resource bank that can be replicated around the country and give women who represent themselves access to the legal materials they need.

Nowhere is the organization’s mission of providing access to justice more deserving of support than in the cases of women who have been jailed for defending themselves against an abuse partner, said Douglas R. Young, president of the American College of Trial Lawyers.

“The College fully embraces the visionary work of the Tulane Law School Women’s Prison Project in creating its inaugural Access to Justice Fellow. By developing a model program to ‘educate, train, and provide resources for incarcerated women’ in post-conviction proceedings, where the right to counsel does not exist, the Women’s Prison Project will significantly expand the rights of those who deserve to have their life stories fully presented in the context of legal proceedings where those stories may make a difference.”

In addition to the Fellow’s work, the WPP, in partnership with the American Bar Association’s Commission on Domestic & Sexual Violence (of which Kondkar is a member), would create a national publication, a webinar and presentations at two national conferences to encourage the Project’s wider application in other jurisdictions. At Tulane, the training project will be sustained by future generations of clinic students.

The Gumpert Award is made in honor of the late Hon. Emil Gumpert, Chancellor-Founder of the American College of Trial Lawyers. Judge Gumpert, throughout his more than half-century professional career as an eminent trial lawyer, State Bar president and trial judge, substantially and effectively devoted himself to the administration of justice and to the improvement of trial practice.

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