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## Nicholson Named 10th Powell Public Service Fellow

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The Law School has named third-year law student Peggy Nicholson the 10th Powell Fellow, an honor that will fund her work on behalf of children in the juvenile justice system in North Carolina.

"Juvenile defense has been something that has been a real passion of mine," said Nicholson, a North Carolina native.

"That's why I created this project to target that population of juveniles who are already in the system, who are at this risk for becoming lifelong recidivists."

The [Powell Fellowship](#) awards a salary to a graduating student or law clerk working to provide civil legal services to the indigent. The award is made for one year with the expectation that it will be renewed for a second year.

Nicholson will lead the Juvenile Re-entry Action Project, a plan she designed with her sponsor organization, Advocates for Children's Services, a state-wide program of Legal Aid of North Carolina, based out of Durham, N.C.

The project will help juveniles leaving the detention system re-enter schools and move back into their communities.

"I'll be representing them as they go back to make sure they're getting back into school in a timely fashion, to make sure they're in appropriate educational placements, to hopefully increase the number of kids who are getting re-enrolled, who are graduating and who can become members of society rather than reverting back to criminal behavior," she said.

With state budgets tight, such services are often not a priority, Nicholson said. But if juveniles leaving the system are provided educational, mental health and substance abuse services as needed, "that chance of recidivating decreases."

Nicholson said some of her mentors and friends have been Powell Fellows. "I knew it was a great opportunity to get funding, and I'm very excited that it worked out."

Nicholson, a political science and African studies major at the University of North Carolina, first became interested in public service law as an undergraduate studying abroad in South Africa. While there, she volunteered with an orphanage that was home to refugees from neighboring countries.

"I was just a tutor and a mentor, and these attorneys were doing real things [for the children] that were going to affect their lives long-term, and that's when I started thinking 'That's a way to have a real impact on people — to be an attorney.'"

Nicholson applied to law school with the intention of working in public service. She spent a spring break



trip her first year working for Advocates for Children's Services, her future sponsor. Then in the summer of her first year, as a Fairstein Public Service Fellow, she interned with the Fair Trial Initiative in North Carolina, a capital defense program.

"Most of [defendants on trial for murder] were involved in the juvenile justice system," she said. "There were these points where maybe an attorney, maybe a different intervention would have worked, and they could have been taken off this path that led them to being on trial for murder."

Nicholson returned from her summer job committed to helping kids in the juvenile justice system. In her second summer she saw a broader national perspective working for the Juvenile Law Center in Philadelphia. She began talking to advocates, mentors and Law School professors and administrators about crafting a project and applying for a fellowship.

When she found out she would be a Powell Fellow, she immediately called her family.

"I tried to remain calm when the dean called me," she said. "I think my mom screamed enough for me."

Nicholson, who has a full merit scholarship to the Law School as a Hardy Cross Dillard Scholar, has contributed more than 200 pro bono hours to the community since becoming a law student, and is president of the Law School's student-run Public Interest Law Association. She has also served on the board of Child Advocacy & Research Education and the editorial board of the Virginia Journal of Social Policy & the Law.

"Peggy Nicholson bowled me over when I spoke to her about her project," said Vice Dean [Elizabeth Magill](#), who served on the Powell Fellow selection committee. "She has ambitious goals, but after talking to her, I am confident she will go very far in achieving them. I am so pleased that she will do this great work as a Powell Fellow."

Nicholson said she is looking forward to not only serving the children of North Carolina, but perhaps contributing to a change in how imprisoned juveniles' return to society is handled.

"What I hope will happen in North Carolina, as it's happened in some other cities and states, is a more holistic approach to juvenile defense," she said. "So an attorney who is representing a juvenile in front of the judge will not only be dealing with the offense, but also what educational problems there are, [and] what mental health/substance abuse issues are there, because that's what the juvenile justice system is supposed to be about — rehabilitation."