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20

### News & Trends

- 8 Consumer data will be 'more accurate, timely and complete'
- 8 Illinois dean inflated data to enhance his salary
- 10 Best profs, most competitive students and other honors awarded by Princeton Review
- 11 The good and the bad
- 16 What diversity?
- 18 Faculty diversity leads to more diverse student leadership
- 22 The transfer question
- 24 Should I stay or should I go?

### Profiles

- 20 'I feel very empowered'

### Departments

- 6 **Commentary:** Is a great lawyer born or made?
- 12 **Employment:** Best cities for buying power
- 14 **Entertainment:** Why a law professor writes fiction
- 62 **Entertainment:** How to find love in law school



62



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Clockwise from top left: DANIEL BEITSCH/GETTYIMAGES/THINKSTOCK; MICHAEL FALCO; ARTWORK BY RICHARD STEADHAM

A professional portrait of Courtney Chenette, a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark blazer over a white top. She is standing in a brightly lit hallway with a blurred background.

**Courtney Chenette**, a third year at Pace University School of Law, was honored with the Justice for Women Award, given for her commitment to domestic violence issues and women's rights.

# 'I feel very empowered'

Courtney Chenette was a victim of sexual assault as a teenager. Now the Pace third year is providing support for others in need. **BY MICHELLE WEYENBERG**

**T**he national statistics are staggering. One in five students report being physically or sexually abused by a dating partner in a survey of ninth through 12th graders. Women ages 16 to 24 experience the highest per capita rate of intimate partner violence — triple the national average. Two in three teens do not tell anyone and tend to interpret the violence as “signifying love,” studies report.

And everyone's experience is unique, says Courtney Chenette, a third year at **Pace University School of Law** in White Plains, N.Y., and an advocate for domestic violence, sexual assault and women's rights issues.

For Chenette, it was a traumatic experience of sexual assault as a teenager that

motivated her to dedicate her life to advocating for young survivors of violence. Chenette found that she — like most survivors of sexual assault — lacked the resources needed to effectively navigate the legal system.

“Experiencing violence doesn't just represent one area of your life,” she said. “It affected my education, my personal relationships with family and friends and the way I felt about myself. I found myself wanting to provide that support for others in need.”

As an undergraduate student at Hollins University in Roanoke, Va., she became involved in direct client services for victims of sexual assault at a women's center. After working as a paralegal during college, she decided to take her advocacy to the next

level — law school.

The law has given her the toolbox to help people affected by domestic violence and sexual assault, she said.

For the past two summers she interned at Day One, a nonprofit organization that provides legal services to young survivors of domestic violence in all five New York City boroughs. Day One's clients are all under the age of 24, and include many young mothers and minors under the age of 18. The organization primarily assists clients with orders of protection, but is also involved in all tangential family court work, including custody and child support cases, education law, and some criminal advocacy.

Chenette said Day One has a really high client volume, and part of the mission is

to educate. Community outreach coordinators are involved in this to preempt violence as well as identify when a student might be having an issue with violence.

“Outreach and education is what is going to make communities safer for young people,” she said. “It starts with a dialogue about self-respect. It doesn’t just start when you are 18.”

Last spring, Chenette also participated in the Family Court Legal Program externship through Pace’s Women’s Justice Center. The externship included coursework in Family Law and Children and the Law, and allowed her to work directly with clients under the supervision of Women’s Justice Center attorneys at the Yonkers and White Plains Family Courts.

“Walking into court can be overwhelming for a law student,” she said. “It’s exponentially more overwhelming when you’re entering the court system as a survivor of violence — especially when you’re a young person.”

Jennifer Cranstoun, an attorney with the Family Court Legal Program, supervised Chenette during her externship, and

says this area of law is completely different from, say, tax law.

“When you’re dealing with families in crisis, it’s only natural that you would feel the effects,” she said. “But the great thing about this type of work... it’s very positive because you’re helping to effect change and empower people. I think there are some people that are naturally cut out for this work.”

And, she says, Chenette is one of them.

“She is extremely passionate and kind,” Cranstoun said. “She’s a good listener, but someone that can actively make someone feel better when they are in crisis.”

Chenette was 2011’s recipient of the Justice for Women Award, given annually to a current Pace law student who successfully completed the Center’s Family Court Legal Program externship. Criteria include commitment to domestic violence issues and women’s rights, public interest law, diversity, and scholarship. She is also a Dean’s Scholar and a Presidential Scholar.

Chenette said Pace Law School has been incredibly supportive of students who want to make social change.

Like Cranstoun, Chenette also considers Randolph McLaughlin, a Pace law professor and attorney, as another great mentor. She is currently a law clerk at his firm Newman Ferrara LLP.

“I’ve been fortunate to have several mentors in my law school career who have demonstrated how to turn a passion for social change into a successful and long-lived legal career,” she said.

Chenette is keeping an open mind about career options after graduating, but said her ultimate goal is to do social justice work and make her community a better place.

For her, it has been incredibly motivating to know she can be that care, support and resource that she didn’t have when she needed it. And it’s still important for her to share her story.

“It doesn’t just happen to certain kinds of people,” she said. “Helping other women who experience violence has been both a challenge and a calling every step of the way. I feel very empowered to be in a place in my life where I can give back to that community.”

PHOTO BY MICHAEL FALCO



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