



STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Cesar Vargas

Cesar Vargas is considering two potential career paths: He could become an officer in the Marines as a military lawyer or an assistant district attorney. Vargas, who is finishing up his second year at CUNY Law, acknowledges that on the surface, those career choices may not appear to align with CUNY Law's values. But, he said, these careers are very much in sync with the CUNY Law mission.

"It's all about creating access to justice," he said. As a military lawyer in the Judge Advocate General's (JAG) Corps, Vargas said, he would work toward ensuring fair treatment of troops, and he would defend individuals in courts-martial. He also said he would ensure that generals follow international human rights treaties. "The military is the ultimate in public service," he said. "Plus, troops need representation, and the generals need oversight."

Vargas is torn, however, because he has an equally strong calling to be a prosecutor for the State. "I wouldn't be a traditional prosecutor," he said. "I would work toward changing the system and the prosecutorial model. We need more emphasis on treatment, prevention, and alternatives to incarceration," he explained. "For instance, when we take the accused out of the community and isolate and marginalize him in prison, it often doesn't work." Vargas advocates a more holistic approach involving the community.

"The criminal justice system has to use the strength of the community to prevent a path to crime," he said. "This is especially important in the case of our youth. We need greater community links and intervention, so we don't have to keep prosecuting youths whose lives are changed in a minute because of a misdemeanor or a felony."

A need to diversify the profession is another reason that a prosecutor career holds Vargas's interest. "We need more prosecutors who come from the community," he said. "It makes a big difference for people in the community to know that the people who prosecute them actually understand them and aren't detached from their communities."

In keeping with a community prevention model, Vargas said he intends to join the Community & Economic Development Clinic next year. His goal is to help address the legal needs of local small businesses, including helping them incorporate. "Small businesses are the commercial lifeline of the community. If we help local entrepreneurs flourish, it will help the commercial welfare of the entire community, making it possible for business owners to hire people from within their community," he said, adding, "Jobs are a crime prevention strategy. I love CUNY because it gives you a rich and wide array of possibilities to pursue justice."

Vargas said that other students share his interest, and, as a result, he has started the Prosecutor Law Students Association. Vargas recently interned at the Brooklyn District Attorney's Office. "It was an opportunity to get real legal experience by drafting legal documents and assisting senior ADAs with trials," he said. "It was also an opportunity to see success stories of prison alternative programs."

Vargas cites his Mexican roots as his pull toward social justice. "In Mexico, it's all about 'whoever has money has justice,'" he said. "It's actually not so different from here. The thing I love about CUNY Law is that we want to make sure that race or class doesn't dictate who gets access to justice." ♦♦