



NYLJ PHOTO/RICK KOPSTEIN
Phillip Kim and Alecia F. Walters, both assistant corporation counsel in the city's Law Department, talk with Corporation Counsel Michael Cardozo on the steps of City Hall.

City's Law Department Becomes Bigger Draw

BY THOMAS ADCOCK

WORD IS OUT, so it would seem, that the New York City Law Department is a hot career spot for civic-minded attorneys of what might be called the 9/11 generation.

Typical of the newcomers are Alecia F. Walters and Phillip Kim, merely two of a quantifiable rush of new blood to the law department. With 650 attorneys, the city agency actually ranks as the third-largest Manhattan law office — trailing only Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom and the Legal Aid Society.

According to Stuart D. Smith, director of legal recruitment and development, applications for positions as assistant corporate counsel have jumped from 3,528 in 2001 to 6,281 this year.

Emily Whitfield is not surprised by the new wave of interest in government work, especially New York City government.

"For young lawyers of today," said Ms. Whitfield, a spokeswoman for the American Civil Liberties Union, "the events of 9/11 strike the same sort of chord that the assassination of President Kennedy did for young lawyers back in 1963."

In the summer of 2001, Mr. Kim and Ms. Walters were interns at the law department's Church Street offices, located a stone's throw from Ground Zero. Next Tuesday, both will mark their first anniversary as full-time lawyers in service to a city still somewhat jittery in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

"Working for the city, I have a certain amount of pride," said Mr. Kim, 26, an assistant corporation counsel handling federal litigation. "In my own little way, I feel I'm contributing somehow to the orderly and efficient administration of the city's government."

"It's hard for me to put this into words," added Mr. Kim,

a graduate of Villanova University School of Law. "There's just this feeling that you're doing something for the public. You can't put that into paychecks."

City pay is indeed modest compared to six-figure salaries commanded by first-year associates in large private firms. Mr. Kim and Ms. Walters signed on at the rate of \$49,216 per year. (Salaries rise to as much as \$62,000 in the fifth year, with veteran attorneys earning \$116,000 as division chiefs.)

"If your priority is to make a lot of money, this isn't the place," said Ms. Walters, 27, an assistant corporation counsel in the labor and employment law division, and a graduate of Hofstra University School of Law. "But they train you here, they really put so much into you. I know I wouldn't have the hands-on experience at a private firm."

GratITUDE for the practical experience — and no small measure of surprise — was reflected in evaluation forms completed by this summer's class of law department apprentices: 41 second-year law student interns, who earn \$500 weekly, and 35 first-year unpaid student externs. As one intern put it, "I can't believe these people are letting me do these things."

Twenty-two offers of permanent jobs were made to the interns, most of whom attended and took part in trials, more than half of whom conducted depositions, wrote reply memos, or filed motions in Article 75 and 78 cases.

The responsibility given interns "shocks them," said Mr. Smith, 42, who was with Dorsey & Whitney before joining the law department in 1998. One student was particularly surprised this summer at being selected to conduct a trial in Family Court, in accordance with a New York State statute allowing such supervised action by legal interns in the city law department, district attorney

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offices, the Legal Aid Society and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

In 1999, Mr. Smith ramped up the law department's intern program by, among other things, offering at least modest pay. Each year since, the intern application rate has increased substantially. For the 2003 class of interns, for example, Mr. Smith received 3,252 applications, double that of last year.

Why the jump?

"I like to think it's good word of mouth, and people realizing it's a way to get permanent jobs," said Mr. Smith. "And since 9/11, people are more focused on New York City."

Corporation Counsel Michael Cardozo, a longtime Proskauer Rose partner before joining city government, agreed.

"I do think that public service and pro bono and public interest law has generally picked up post-9/11," said Mr. Cardozo, reflecting on the measurably increased enthusiasm among young lawyers in such work. "I think, too, that the wider legal community is more aware [post-9/11] of what the law department does."

"And with all due respect to the private sector, we have a program [for young lawyers] that competes in every way but salaries," he added. "The word is getting out."

More so than in the private sector, finding a job with the city law department is a competitive venture. Mr. Smith said the odds of landing a spot, from submitting résumé to final interview, are about 2 percent. According to figures from the National Association for Law Placement, the odds of landing a first-year associate job at

a private firm after a call-back interview are 53 percent. For the city law department, said Mr. Smith, that figure is 30 percent.

In two areas of competition with the private sector, the law department wins hands-down: summer interns are fêted by the mayor himself at Gracie Mansion, and they get a long-lasting taste of life-and-death police work.

Each summer, interns are escorted to the police firing range and training facility at Rodman's Neck, where they undergo the same simulations of domestic disputes, robberies and threats used to train officers. In exercises involving split-second decisions on the use of deadly force, this year's summers actually fired soap bullets at their targets.

"It was amazing to see what police officers are faced with," said Mr. Kim. "They have to make quick decisions, they have to follow the law and act courteously and professionally with people who are loud and angry."

Ms. Walters said her intern experience at Rodman's Neck gave her a greater respect for police officers. When she completes her three-year commitment to the law department, she said, "I'll be very marketable."

She said she especially valued her intern trip to Rikers Island, the city's vast jail complex in the East River.

"It's a good place to visit," said Ms. Walters, "but I wouldn't want to live there."