

Serving Those in Their Community

Austin attorney and teacher Armin Salek launches high school legal clinic.

BY ADAM FADEREWSKI

When it comes to legal clinics with student volunteers, one normally thinks of a 1L, 2L, or 3L—not high school students. But that is the case at Akins Early College High School in Austin, where Armin Salek has been leading his pre-law program students in providing legal aid to Akins employees.

The pre-law program had already been established when Salek came on as the career and technical education criminal justice teacher at Akins. But once there, he developed and implemented his vision to provide an experience unlike any other for high school students in the U.S.

“As far as I know, we are the only school in the country that gives students the opportunity to work with real clients, conduct intake, and prepare legal documents,” Salek said. “I wanted to give students an opportunity to recognize their power and their ability to create change. By the high school level, we should be giving students the chance to use their skills in the real world.”

All legal advice provided to clients comes from Salek, but students engage with clients and get their stories and help prepare the necessary documents. All work is done under his license.

The clinic, “Eagle Aid,” a reference to the school mascot, focuses on a specific area of law each year. In its third and latest iteration, students worked on wills and trusts. At the start of each group, there is an extensive classroom discussion about the law, including vocabulary and background. Students put together a draft will that they later review with Salek to help them better understand exactly what is needed and the proper questions to ask.

“We learned the vocabulary of wills and the process of preparing and filing a will,” Salek said. “They learned about the difference between a testator and an executor, the drawbacks of a holographic will, the qualifications to draft a will, what a trust is, and who can serve as a witness, among many other things.”

Before launching a clinic, the importance of client confidentiality and building trust is emphasized with each student, including the often-heavy nature of the subject matter they will be dealing with.

“Clients come to you with heavy hearts and they trust you with very personal information so that you can help advise them with legal issues,” Salek said. “The students need to understand that what is shared with them is confidential. Our clients’ information is their personal story, and we are only borrowing that information to support them in a legal process. That piece is especially important because the people we serve are within our school community.”

This need for confidentiality and trust is part of the focus of the practice client interviews students conduct with Salek, a 2016 graduate of the University of Houston Law Center. Students practice using professional language, demonstrating strong body language, and earning the client’s trust.

“Our students work long hours after school, but rarely in a professional services-oriented environment,” Salek said. “I doubt that people are hoping that a group of teenagers show up when they call for an attorney, so we have to further compensate for that fact.”

The depth of preparation Salek and his students devote before opening clinics has gone a long way to assuage any hesitations clients have had, and Salek said most clients leave having been deeply impressed by the professional behavior of the students and the authority of their presence in the room.

These impressions caught the attention of the Dell Legal Diversity Committee, which met with Salek to discuss sponsoring the program.

“Right away, Armin made an impact on us due to his infectious enthusiasm for his programs and especially for his students,” said Kelly Walton, of Dell Legal. “When talking to him about how hard his students work, their innovative legal aid work, and their desire for information about what opportunities exist, I knew he was doing something incredibly special and Dell Legal wanted to be a part of it.”

The sponsorship from the Dell Legal Diversity Committee led to new avenues of experience for students participating in the program including career panels with the committee where students can learn about legal careers and network with Dell Legal professionals with whom some mentorships have been established.

“They are amazing kids who work incredibly hard to be successful in the program, in moot court, and other activities,” Walton said. “Several of Dell’s attorneys have helped the students prepare for activities such as moot court and have been very impressed with the level of skill and ease with public speaking.”

Salek said the next step in the Eagle Aid program is to become established as a hub for legal services in Austin. Steps are already being taken in that direction, with a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, clinic held in September in partnership with Education Austin and several other organizations. Additionally, students planned to host a cancer law clinic in October and Salek said discussions are underway with Volunteer Legal Services of Central Texas and the University of Texas School of Law to host two more legal service events on campus.

“We have served members of our school community, and now it’s time to serve members in our South Austin community,” Salek said.

Salek hopes that the experiences the students encounter during the legal aid clinics will prepare them for college and carry over to whatever profession they end up in.

For example, Salek said students recently met with a client who had unfortunately lost a family member prior to the scheduled meeting. Students presented the client with flowers, a choice of beverage, and snacks. “My hope is we treat everyone that way regardless of the industry they ultimately choose.” **TBJ**