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## DEDMAN LAW STUDENTS AND FACULTY CREATE A NEW APP TO HELP TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS WIPE THE SLATE CLEAN

BY CHERRI GANN '15

### **ROBBIE HAMILTON KEEPS THE SENIOR RESIDENTS LOOKING THEIR BEST IN**

the independent retirement living home, in Richardson, Texas, where she has run a full-service hair salon for the past 15 years. Amid cuts, colors and perms, she and her clients indulge a shared fondness for big band music, family lore, jokes and stories about Hamilton's two cats – Americus and Novalee.

"There's lots of laughter in here, and I love it," she says.

The petite 56-year-old radiates such joy that one would never guess she once lived in a darker world. Her ordeal began with sexual exploitation at the age of 17. A spiral into addiction and homelessness continued for years. At age 41, she began to turn her life around and found New Friends New Life. The Dallas nonprofit offers a comprehensive program for formerly trafficked women and children that includes counseling, support groups, education and job training.

Hamilton, now 16 years sober, first

visited SMU's Judge Elmo B. Hunter Legal Center for Victims of Crimes Against Women in 2015, intent on clearing the record she had acquired during 25 years of working in Dallas strip clubs, battling drug addiction and experiencing repeated arrests. The Hunter Legal Center was established in 2014 with a gift from alumni Ray L. and Nancy Ann Hunter Hunt and named in honor of Mrs. Hunt's father, a distinguished judicial leader and public servant who served as a judge in Western Missouri for 38 years.

The clinic's services include helping trafficking survivors determine whether their criminal record convictions can be

cleared either by order of nondisclosure—which seals certain convictions—or expungement—which clears a conviction from the record. It's a lengthy process that begins with survivors obtaining their entire criminal records and sitting down with an attorney or advocate who evaluates each conviction in accordance with Texas Government Code Section 411.0728, the state law that addresses the criminal records of human trafficking survivors.

A 2016 study by the Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault at the University of Texas at Austin found that about 79,000 minors and youth are victims of sex trafficking in Texas. According to Human Trafficking Search, Texas ranks second, between California and Florida, among the top three states with the most activity. A 2014 report funded by the National Institute of Justice reveals Dallas is a \$99 million market for the sex trade.

It's common for women coerced or exploited into the sex trade to accumulate arrests and convictions related to drugs,

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prostitution and theft. When they can escape, criminal records acquired during a life of duress get in the way of rebuilding their lives. As public records, criminal records appear on housing, employment and other background checks. Survivors escape trafficking only to be judged anew with each attempt to rejoin society. Clearing a criminal record leads to reclaimed freedom.

When Hamilton first approached the Hunter Legal Center, Natalie Nanasi, a Dedman Law associate professor and director of the center, and her student attorneys used a handmade handbook for navigating the extremely specific elements present in the law. It was an overwhelming flowchart spread over 30 pages and filled with hundreds of color-coded bubbles representing convictions and lines tracing the circuitous routes of queries about sentences such as deferred adjudication, discharge and dismissal, or confinement due to conviction.

Nanasi and her student attorneys manually completed the tedious routine of checking every step for each conviction

on a criminal record, which could take months. In the meantime, survivors remained in limbo as they tried to restart



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their lives by finding jobs and safe places to live.

Everyone involved agreed that the process needed to be improved and accelerated.

## RESEARCH AND REASONING

In fall 2017, the Technology, Innovation and Law – Designing Legal Apps course was offered for the first time as part of the Dedman Law curriculum. Keith Robinson, associate professor and co-director of SMU's Tsai Center for Law, Science and Innovation, taught the course, which added a new twist to “think like a lawyer” instruction.

First, students gained hands-on experience in the use of Neota Logic, an artificial intelligence software platform. Then Robinson formed three teams and partnered each with a Texas-based legal-aid provider. In addition to SMU's Hunter Legal Center, students worked with the Force for Immigrant Rights and Empowerment (F.I.R.E.), a Dallas-based coalition of nonprofits and lawyers that provide legal assistance and other resources to



**ANALOG TO APP** SMU law professors Keith Robinson and Natalie Nanasi spearheaded an interdisciplinary legal project that is changing lives. Student attorneys worked together to transform a 30-page, color-coded spreadsheet into the Texas Fresh Start app. The app streamlines a process that could take weeks or even months to complete manually. Saving time means trafficking survivors don't have to wait too long to leave their pasts behind.



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immigrants; and Texas Appleseed, an Austin-based public interest justice center.

In addition to interacting with professional lawyers and trying out service delivery skills, the students also created authentic technology products to solve real problems for real clients.

The Tsai Center, established by an anonymous gift from a Dedman Law alumnus in 2014, responds to the ever-changing legal landscape with programs that include design, research, software building and app creation in its curricula. "Students need to understand that emerging technologies are going to affect their legal practice," Robinson says.

He chose legal-aid agencies to serve as clients for the app development projects for two reasons: to expose students to current social justice issues and to lend a helping hand to the cash-strapped organizations that need technology to further their missions.

Also, Robinson liked the idea of providing students with a real-world application for their work. Students flexed their research and reasoning muscles and applied what they already had learned in law school, he says.

Nanasi wasted no time in pitching the complicated intake process for trafficking survivors as a great subject for an app.

"This is a rare area of the law where all the answers are yes or no, with no nuance," she says. "The process is perfectly suited for technology."

## RECLAIMING FREEDOM

Emily Pratt '18, a former clinic chief in the Hunter Legal Center, was among the student attorneys who helped Robinson's students understand the significance of their project.

"We needed them to understand what a big deal human trafficking is and to know something about the community of survivors that their app would help," says Pratt, who is now an assistant district attorney for Collin County, Texas.

For Hamilton, drug possessions were the source of her arrests and felony convictions. But she had put that life behind her long before her first visit to the legal clinic. Hamilton continues to be a dedicated and active sobriety advocate, serving as a sponsor and speaker for Alcoholics Anonymous and other addiction awareness groups. She joined the



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New Friends New Life program in 2004 after completing a 15-month prison sentence for a drug conviction and remains involved with the organization.

Hamilton's life represents a remarkable turnaround, and yet her criminal record limits her choices, including her desire to move to a new apartment.

"I tried eight places that all turned me down because of those felony drug charges," she says.

For the same reason, Hamilton, who experienced homelessness for more than three years, has been turned away from meaningful volunteer opportunities to assist others who have been through similar experiences.

**NEW BEGINNINGS** Trafficking survivor Robbie Hamilton turned her life around. Now she is cleaning up her criminal record with the help of SMU's Hunter Legal Center.

## DIGITAL AGE SOLUTION

Chris Cochran '18 and Richard Sparr '18 were Robinson's students when they worked on the app with the legal clinic. Cochran, a private equity associate at the law firm Roberts & Willie PLLC, says he was struck by the repercussions that follow trafficking survivors for the rest of their lives if they can't clean their records. Sparr, an associate counsel in the financial services group at the law firm Holland & Knight, appreciated the collaborative nature of the project with students coming together to solve a problem. He also developed an appreciation for the role innovation plays in the law.

"The course showed us the future of legal services," Sparr said. "You have to leverage technology to provide affordability."

They started by studying the code pertaining to trafficking survivors and learning how it fit among nearly a dozen related statutes. Hunter Law Center students assisted with mapping legal questions and answers, testing scenarios and reconciling the clinic's vision with compatible technology. Professors Nanasi and Robinson provided guidance, but the students owned the project – a perfect fit with the philosophy behind their clinic

work, Nanasi says.

"I was encouraged that the students understood what they did not know but knew where to find the information," Robinson says.

## HITTING RESTART

The final product, the web-based Texas Fresh Start Application, is a step-by-step tool that can be used by advocates, or perhaps clients themselves, to quickly run through questions about the criminal record, beginning with the oldest offense and repeating the process for each subsequent offense. As users progress through the app, they learn whether a charge or conviction is eligible to be sealed or cleared. Nanasi now uses it as part of the clinic intake process for trafficking survivors.

"There's nothing worse than having to tell a new client we can't help after she has spent time gathering her criminal history," she says. "With the app, I can evaluate quickly and let someone know."

Hamilton continues moving forward. She joined the staff of New Friends New Life in 2017 as a youth mentor and survivor advocate in its Youth Resource Center. In that role, she helps young survivors on the path to changing their lives. She encourages their journey of healing by guiding lessons about self-care, anger management, forgiveness and shame.

"I've been open about my experience," Hamilton says. "Any person that I'm talking to may be the one who needs to hear that people can come out of this."

She appreciates the persistence of Nanasi and the Hunter Legal Center student attorneys. For nearly three years they have helped her shed another part of her old life. Five convictions have been either sealed or expunged from her record, including three of her four felonies – and the Texas Fresh Start app helped complete the last bit toward this goal.

Now they are waiting to learn if Texas Gov. Greg Abbott will grant a pardon request for the remaining conviction. Because of the timeframe when it occurred, it is not eligible to be cleared or sealed.

"It's humbling to have students working on your behalf," Hamilton says. "This has been a big deal to me that will change my life."

