

Students

Rutgers Law Student Heads to Department of Justice Honors Program

Kyle Smiddie's desire to advocate for the powerless was shaped growing up in Appalachia

By Janet Donohue



Credit: Courtesy of Kyle Smiddie
Kyle Smiddie with his parents, Bob Smiddie and Beth Amoriya.

Kyle Smiddie was raised to believe that what a person does for, and with, others who are less fortunate is the measure of that person's worth.

It was the lesson taught by his parents – a potter and a school psychologist – on their 45-acre farm in Appalachia, surrounded by a community marked by poverty and struggle. And it was the reason for his applying to the highly competitive honors program within the U.S. Department of Justice, the only means by which the department hires entry-level attorneys.

Smiddie, in his third year at [Rutgers School of Law–Newark](#), reacted to his acceptance with characteristic enthusiasm and humility. “I hope to make my father proud,” he said. “He worked for civil rights during the 1960s from the outside; I hope I can only do so much from the inside.”

Growing up in a community in which the poverty rate was 16 percent and only 7 percent of the residents had a college degree, Smiddie recalls childhood friends “whose only meal was the free lunch and whose only way out of the county was the military.” Later, at Haverford College, Smiddie witnessed the unmet need for advocates for the powerless through a project in which he interviewed low-income people in laundromats to study their impressions of government.

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“Their near-unanimous view,” Smiddie said, “can be summed up by the response of one customer, Bob, who described the powerlessness he felt: ‘They don’t care about us. I’m just here in my rinky-dink house, with my rinky-dink car and my rinky-dink life.’ Smiddie’s paper, “Why Poor People Don’t Participate in Politics,” won the school’s Herman M. Somer Prize for best political science thesis.

After receiving his bachelor’s degree with honors in political science, Smiddie spent two years completing service work with Haverford House, the Red Cross, and AmeriCorps. He did community outreach for heating assistance programs in Philadelphia, helped Hurricane Katrina victims to rebuild their homes in New Orleans, and mentored foster kids in southeastern Ohio.

Before coming to Rutgers, he also worked for the Ohio Fair Schools Campaign, organizing high school students to speak to their state representatives, and managed a candidate's campaign for the Ohio Legislature. "In each of these experiences," he recalled, "I felt a sense of pride in watching the people I served become empowered to do things they might not have thought were possible."

Smiddie had already decided to pursue a master's in social work when friends and family members encouraged him to apply to law school, which, they said, "would give me more power to work for justice for people who often don't have advocates." In May he is scheduled to receive both a J.D. from the law school and M.S.W. from the Rutgers School of Social Work.

He applied to Rutgers, he said, because of its commitment to serving students who were not simply the fortunate ones. And after hearing about the law school's Minority Student Program that supported racial minorities and poor white students, he said, "I knew this was the environment where I wanted to come to learn about justice."

At the law school, Smiddie is New Jersey developments editor of the Rutgers Law Review and alumni liaison to the moot court board. He has been awarded a New Jersey State Bar Foundation Scholarship, a Whitman Family Scholarship, and a Charles H. Revson Law Student Public Interest Fellowship. In 2009-2010, he was an Eagleton Fellow and worked in the New Jersey Office of Legislative Services as a Henry J. Raimondo Legislative Fellow.

In addition to thriving academically in the joint J.D./M.S.W. program, Smiddie has been an enthusiastic participant in the Minority Student Program. "The students in this program take on an identity that makes you feel like you have a family that is sharing the difficulty of law school together. I have also," he added "gained a perspective on what it's like to be marginalized in America just because of the color of your skin, even if you are privileged in other ways."

Smiddie has furthered his practical experience as a legal and social work intern with the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, where he has written memoranda on federal abstention doctrine and prisoner re-entry laws in New Jersey and conducted workshops for ex-offenders.

In his application to the DOJ honors program, Smiddie wrote: "An opportunity to work for the Civil Rights Division would fulfill a dream I have been working toward for so long." He cited the values with which he had been raised, the impression that the deprivation of his rural community had made, and the litigator on behalf of vulnerable populations that the U.S. Department of Justice would help him become..

And what aspect of his background in Appalachia, which has so clearly shaped his career goals, does he think will contribute most to his work at the justice department?

"I saw the people in my hometown who are extremely hard workers; however, their skills, which had kept their families supported for years, don't seem to work in our economy today ... We don't seem to need factory workers anymore. We don't seem to need coal miners or mill workers,," Smiddie said. "We have to acknowledge their humanity and find ways, not to blame them for not fitting into the economy, but to make sure they are not cut off from new opportunities."