MICHAEL WOODS FELT CHEATED. WHEN THE 60-YEAR-OLD contacted his former employer last year, he was told that he had accrued only three years toward his pension and would be paid less than $1,000 a year when he retired. That hardly aligned with what Woods had been told in 1998, when he went on long-term disability after working at the medical imaging firm for six years. Back then, Woods remembered, he was told that he would accrue benefits until retirement. At Woods’ insistence, the company recalculated his benefits, but still agreed to pay him only through 2002, when it froze the pension fund. Woods thought that was strange: he had no memory and no record of being notified of the change, as federal law requires.

With his pension in limbo, Woods’ online search for answers led to Mia Midenjak (LAW’11), who took his case pro bono. Midenjak wrote a letter to the company, and one week later, Woods received a response: his pension would be frozen as of 2011, and he would receive $764 a month. “I couldn’t thank Mia enough for what she did,” says Woods.

Midenjak was one of 10 School of Law graduates whose work last year was supported by the new BU School of Law Public Service Fellowship Program, which awarded each one a $40,000 fellowship through the dean’s office to work full-time for underresourced courts, government agencies, and nonprofits. Fellows fanned across the United States and abroad to provide their services, from clerking at the Boston Land Court to representing juveniles at the Defender Association in Seattle, Wash., to advocating on behalf of refugees at Asylum Access Ecuador in Quito.

Midenjak juggled 10 to 15 cases at a time, working for people who had lost track of their pensions, claimed their pensions were calculated incorrectly, were flat-out denied benefits, or were told by union representatives that they had no right to a pension. Each case could take up to several years to resolve. And although the nonprofit’s success rate was only 25 to 30 percent, all clients’ cases are pursued to the full extent of the law.

“Even if we can’t get them a pension,” she says, “most of our clients appreciate getting a clear answer about why they’re not owed a benefit. Every day I work here I feel that I’m actually helping people who need help.”
Mia Midenjak (LAW’11) worked at the New England Pension Assistance Project as one of 10 graduates in the 2011 School of Law Public Service Fellowship Program.