

As a student in the School of Law in the 1980s, Michael A. Gollin contemplated a career in environmental law, with a public interest emphasis. But when it came time to land a summer internship, which was necessary to help fund his education, he realized an unpaid public sector or nonprofit placement was not an option.

“I needed a paid position,” says Gollin (LAW’84), “and I found one in a patent law firm in New York City.” He loved the work, which led to a career in intellectual property law. But his desire to pursue public interest law persisted. In 1984, he and classmates Joe Ronson (LAW’85) and Dan Van Doren (LAW’85) began thinking about how to broaden the choices for fellow students who shared that desire, but like Gollin, couldn’t afford to act on it.

Together they founded the Public Interest Project (PIP), made Gollin its first president, and agreed on a simple mission: to provide financial support through grants to students seeking summer work in otherwise unpaid public interest internships.

The founders and friends raised enough money to offer the first PIP grants of \$1,000 to \$2,000 to 16 LAW students in summer 1984. Today, the organization is the leading student group at LAW, fostering a commitment to non-profit, government, and pro bono work and promoting community service to all interested students and alumni of the school.

The group sponsors a number of annual fundraising events that fund the grants. Since its start, PIP has awarded more than 900 summer grants, 75 this summer (amounts typically range from \$3,000 to \$4,000), according to 2013–2014 PIP presidents Netta Sofer (LAW’14) and Matthew Horowitz (LAW’14). Among the agencies where PIP grantees have worked are Greater Boston Legal Services, the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, district attorneys’ offices, the Family Law Project for Battered Women, and Legal Aid of Cambodia in Phnom Penh.

A patent attorney at the law firm Venable LLP in Washington, D.C., Gollin hasn’t veered from his passion for public service. In

2002, he founded Public Interest Intellectual Property Advisors (www.piipa.org), which provides pro bono intellectual property services to developing nations.

This year, he was honored for his work by PIP, which presented him with its first Public Interest Project Innovators Award. In accepting the award at PIP’s April auction, sponsored annually by LAW, Gollin noted that many important ideas ultimately don’t succeed, and those that do, like PIP, should be celebrated. “Service to others,” he said, “is the true path to happiness.”

Gollin is now working to secure PIP’s legacy, which is taking on new urgency as he contends with a debilitating degenerative illness.

In 2012, he was diagnosed with the incurable motor neuron disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), commonly known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. In response, he began working aggressively to speed the search for new therapies for ALS, in part by becoming an advisor (pro bono) with the ALS Association.

ALS is progressive and terminal, a reality that Gollin both accepts and struggles against. “Whatever ability I have now,” he says, “I’ll have less tomorrow. You do continue grieving that loss. But I’m learning alternative technologies, and I’ll adapt. There is joy in that. But it takes work to find it.”

While ALS has slowed Gollin’s speech, it has not diminished his ideas, spirit, and enthusiasm for



COURTESY OF MICHAEL GOLLIN

Michael Gollin, a patent attorney, was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease in 2012. “I’ll adapt,” he says. “There is joy in that. But it takes work to find it.”

public sector work. Being diagnosed with a terminal illness, he says, leads to a heightened state of mental and emotional clarity. “It really makes you focus,” he says.

At the April PIP auction, it was also announced that Gollin’s family has established the Michael Gollin Fund for Public Interest and Intellectual Property at Boston University. The endowed fund will provide a permanent source of funding that will help students pursue public interest and intellectual property law, regardless of their financial constraints. It wraps Gollin’s two passions into one source of support, giving testimony to his belief that the path to fulfillment requires both creativity and service to others. ■

BU welcomes contributions to the Michael Gollin Fund and the Public Interest Project. For more information, contact Nate O’Connell at nathanoc@bu.edu.

Michael Gollin (LAW’84) pursues his passions

BY FRANCIE KING (GRS’80)