

## ALUMNI PROFILE

### Jennifer Jaff (L'84)

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When Jennifer Jaff (L'84) embarked on a career in the law, she never imagined her duties would include introducing a client to Brad Pitt. But then she also never thought she would have six surgeries and become so sick with Crohn's Disease that she couldn't leave her house. But all this and more has happened to Jaff — and she is not complaining. "If I'd never had this disease, then I wouldn't have this work," said Jaff in a phone interview. "The beauty of this work is that I can save lives without leaving home."

In 2005, Jaff founded Advocacy for Patients with Chronic Illness, a tax-exempt organization that provides free information, advice and advocacy on health and disability insurance, employment disability and similar issues. Jaff started it so others wouldn't have to look as long and hard for answers as she has during her 20-plus years with inflammatory bowel disease.

"For a lot of people, I'm the last resort," Jaff says. The organization has responded to 2000 patients so far: obtaining a medical visa that saved the leg of a man in the Dominican Republic; securing student loan forgiveness for a patient with multiple sclerosis; helping a high school student avoid being held back a grade due to absenteeism from chronic illness. "Probably half of what we do is insurance appeals," Jaff explains. "The rest is split between problems with schools and employment issues."

Jaff estimates that she helps approximately a dozen people a day. "Sixty to seventy percent of the time they have questions I can answer. ... What's most touching is when I say to someone, we'll do something for you — and they burst into tears because it's the one glimmer of human



Jaff, center, with Mike McCready and Eddie Vedder of the rock group Pearl Jam. Like Jaff, McCready has Crohn's Disease.

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kindness they've been shown."

And then there was the Brad Pitt experience. "We had a very sick patient who we thought would die. All she wanted for her 26th birthday was to meet Brad Pitt," Jaff explains. So Jaff wrote a letter, got it in the right hands and before she knew it, Pitt had called her client, sent her flowers and arranged and paid for the woman to visit Los Angeles. "The day he called her, she ate for the first time in months," Jaff says.

Pitt is not the organization's only brush with fame. "Our largest donor is the rock group Pearl Jam. Their lead guitarist has Crohn's disease, too," Jaff says. In addition to patient advocacy, the organization also pushes for changes to the Social Security disability system and makes other policy recommendations. Although Jaff has done many different things with her law degree — litigating, lobbying, teaching and serving five years as the lead health care fraud attorney in the Connecticut attorney general's office — "nothing I have done in my career has been as rewarding as this job," she says. "We are literally saving lives."

— Anne Cassidy