

Self Evaluation: Fordham Law's Feerick Center for Social Justice

By Erin Heiferman

Throughout the past eight weeks, I had the pleasure of working as a Siena College Summer Legal Fellow at Fordham Law's Feerick Center for Social Justice. The Feerick Center's mission is to unite low-income and marginalized individuals with the legal resources necessary to improve their lives. During the fellowship, I had the opportunity to engage in the Feerick Center's social reform objectives through both hands on work experience and research projects. The knowledge I have gained from these experiences has played a critical role in forwarding my professional skills, learning about our legal system, pursuing a career in law, and becoming a more cognizant American citizen. Thus, in this self-evaluation, it is my aim to convey some of the unique projects, site visits, and meetings I was involved with at the Feerick Center, and the ways in which these opportunities enabled me to gain a diverse skill set and exposure to the legal field.

During the fellowship, I conducted research for the establishment of a new project the Feerick Center is adding to its collection of initiatives. Early into the fellowship, I attended a meeting with Dora Galacatos, the center's Executive Director, and Joe Crowley, a Senior Legal Editor at Thomson Reuters Practical Law and an advocate for veterans, to discuss and learn about veteran's legal issues. Specifically, the meeting focused on veteran's issues relating to benefits, consumer law, and family law. This discussion introduced me to significant legal matters I knew nothing about prior to this experience.

After the meeting, I was assigned to research family law concerns regarding veterans. Specifically, I learned about the adoption, child support, custody, and domestic violence issues veterans face. The most unanticipated piece of knowledge I gained from this project is that the distinction of being a veteran introduces a dense layer of complication in regards to family law

matters. For instance, domestic violence issues can be viewed with a different lens when questions of mental health problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, often times developed after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event like military combat, are brought into the picture. Overall, this research was especially fulfilling and interesting to me as I am looking at family law as a possible concentration for law school. Therefore, this research project not only provided a brief introduction to family law concerns, but also enabled me to become more aware of legal hardships veterans face.

Another standout moment of the fellowship was a fascinating site visit to the Immigration Council Hearing at City Hall. This meeting covered the issue of immigrants being arrested in civil, criminal, housing and family courts by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). I learned that this problematic because ICE arrests in court disrupt the functionality of our court system. Furthermore, testimonies from organizations such as the Immigrant Defense Project, Her Justice, and Bronx Legal Services, conveyed that policy changes are crucial. Specifically, the organizations contended that it is imperative that immigrants feel comfortable enough to seek justice in court, that ICE is arresting individuals who do not pose security risk, and that New York becomes less safe when segments of our community are excluded from the court system. It was interesting to not only to learn about immigration law and how a city hall hearing is conducted, but the passionate testimonies showed me that lawyers can serve as an enormous voice for those who are facing injustice.

The final portion of my fellowship with the Feerick Center that I would like to highlight is working at the Bronx Civil Court each Thursday at The Civil Legal Advice and Resource Office (CLARO). CLARO is a legal clinic that addresses the needs of unrepresented debtors who are being sued by creditors in New York City Civil Court by providing legal advice for litigants regarding self-representation strategies. My role at CLARO involved completing intake forms

for clients prior to their appointment with a volunteer attorney. This task taught me how to find essential information in legal documents, various ways the client could find out about the action, and exposed me to the industry of debt buyers. Furthermore, I also had the opportunity to shadow volunteer attorneys when they were working with clients. This not only exposed me to advanced legal terminology and processes, but this experience also showed me the high levels of compassion and professionalism attorneys must maintain when working in sensitive situations.

As someone who is passionate about helping others through the medium of law, I could not have asked for a better fellowship. Firstly, I gained professional skills that are essential in all types of work environments. Specifically, the way in which Dora conducted meetings showed me the importance of meeting organization, and that utilizing agendas and minutes allows for tasks to be accomplished more efficiently. Additionally, having the opportunity to participate in staff meetings enhanced my public speaking skills. Lastly, working on multiple projects at a time fostered stronger organizational and time management skills. Aside from professional skills, by working in a law school, I learned more about how the law school application process works, and received enlightening advice from experienced individuals about pursuing a career in law. However, if I were asked to pick the most invaluable part of my fellowship, it would be the new sense of passion and drive I gained from working at the Feerick Center. Even though, I am still unsure about the direction law school will take me in, the Feerick Center showed me first hand the positive impact lawyers can have on the lives of individuals. Thus, regardless of the field of law I choose to pursue, this experience has inspired me to have a career where I can utilize the law to better the hardships people go through.