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Legal Fellowship Reflection

As the Covid 19 pandemic prohibited the Pace law Environmental clinic from meeting in person, I pondered how I would begin working on cases without any background knowledge and limited guidance. Upon beginning the fellowship, I was introduced to the Pace University Law School students who were volunteering for the clinic. Fortunately, I was able to work with them under their guidance and instruction. It was inspiring to see their range of knowledge from how to compose legal documents to the regulations that had to be followed when filing them. The remote fellowship was structured so that the Pace Law students were assigned a case with a Siena intern. Then the law student would assign certain work and tasks specific to the needs of each case.

Before beginning a case, I was introduced to the legal databases, West Law and Lexis Nexis. I had not been familiar with either of these databases prior to the fellowship, so it was truly a learning experience navigating through the site to find exactly what I needed. It was important to set the right filters when searching, like which state law and which level court, or it could take hours going through articles in search for minimal information.

The first case that I was assigned was regarding sewage overflow and the other party's failure to comply with the law that mandated that they inform the public. The Pace Environmental Clinic was initially served with a judgement stating that they lost the case.

Therefore, my assignment was to file a notice of appeal. While the notice of appeal is typically a simpler legal document that is shorter in length, the new Covid-19 guidelines made it a bit more complex. Initially the case had been filed as a paper case, but I had to research if the Covid-19 guidelines continued to allow paper filing or if e-filing was mandatory. Additionally, my research entailed finding out if the entire case had to be converted to e-file if the notice of appeal was e-filed.

My first course of action was to search West Law for the new guidelines to file the notice of appeal. After a couple of hours searching through filing rules for the appellate court, it became clear that the database had not been recently updated since the pandemic began. Ironically, I had to stray from the academic databases and turn towards what I, as an undergraduate student, was more familiar with: Google. Ny.gov was the most thorough site that provided me the answers I was looking for. Similarly to West Law, I still had to use details from the case such as the district and level of court to refine my research. Ultimately, the court highly advised that further legal documents be e-filed, but if the case was previously a hard copy case then it was not mandatory. Furthermore, if the notice of appeal were to be e-filed then the previous case documents would have to be converted to e-file. Drafting the notice of appeal was my first insight of what it would be like to be a lawyer. While the notice of appeal has a template format, filling it out with the information from the case still served me with an authentic experience.

The highlight of my experience was sitting through a zoom call with potential clients for another case in which the opposing party was using harmful chemicals in the community's bodies of water. This case was nascent and not yet definite, so the video conference raised a lot

of integral questions that I had not thought about. *Would the plaintiff be more successful if it were an individual or an organization named to the case? Did citizens who were unassociated with the potential plaintiff file meaningful comments within the correct time period? If the chemicals were found to be harmful to an endangered species in the region, would it be beneficial to the case even if it were not affiliated with the damage of the water?* It was such a learning experience hearing the conversation between the potential client, concerned citizens, an environmental expert, Professor Ommen and a law student volunteer from Pace. Everyone brought a different aspect of knowledge to the conversation as they worked together to develop a plan to take action. I was Enlightened with how many miniscule details were essential to file a lawsuit.

Throughout my experience at the Pace Law Environmental Clinic, I was introduced to a new vocabulary of legal terms, an unfamiliar concise way of legal writing and an entire area of law that I had never explored. I certainly received all of the educational aspects that came with the legal fellowship, but I also was truly inspired by the work of the clinic and the dedication of everyone involved- from concerned citizens eager to start a lawsuit to protect the environment to pace law school students volunteering while juggling other work amidst a pandemic. The environment is definitely worth fighting for and I am so grateful to be a very small part of the clinic this summer. The experience was invaluable for a pre-law student looking to gain real life experience prior to law school.