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Summer Legal Fellows

Experience Essay

July 29, 2020

My Touro Law Center Online Fellowship

When applying for the Touro Law School summer fellowship, my expectations were to live in Long Island, meet with clients daily, and get the full experience that Summer Legal Fellows have gotten in the past. Due to the restrictions of COVID-19, my expectations did not match my reality, however I would not change the experience that I had through this fellowship. While I did not get to experience the in person meetings, the Law Center itself, or the face-to-face contact with my supervising attorneys, I gained new experiences and knowledge that would not have come to me had this fellowship not been online.

My first experience with AveMaria and Touro Law School was being a juror on a Mock Trial case. This was a new experience to me because although I did mock trial in high school through Touro I saw a much more professional environment. Both the prosecution and the defense seemed to know exactly what they were doing, were prepared with questions and rebuttals, and the overall trial flowed nicely. Not only was this interesting to see how Mock Trial works at Touro, but it was also helpful to meet supervising attorneys prior to the start of the fellowship.

When the fellowship started, I was honestly a bit nervous to see how the online experience would pan out, but thanks to AveMaria and the rest of Touro Law School, the transition to an online fellowship ran smoothly. In the beginning, it was difficult to communicate

and receive tasks, being that we could not meet in person. I am more of a hands on learner, so being told what to do as opposed to actually seeing it was an adjustment that I had to make. Constant emails and weekly Zoom meetings helped alleviate some of the stress of starting a new fellowship from a different standing than previous Summer Legal Fellows.

The new summer normal for me was waking up early to check my email. AveMaria would frequently send me clients to call, either get updates on a working case or take an intake for a new case. This was an all-together different experience for me because in previous internships that I have had I have never worked with clients. The first call I made, I was very nervous because I did not want to make a mistake or step on someone else's toes, but after a few calls, this became my favorite part of the internship. One client in particular was being evicted and I was assigned a few phone calls with him to get updates on the eviction process. In his particular case, he was being evicted, and it was the Law Center's job to find out whether he had any rights against the eviction. Although it was a professional call in which I received the information that I was supposed to, this man could have talked for hours. In his case, as well as many of the other client's, he just wanted someone to talk to. He expressed that he was lonely and scared and that my call had made his day. Many of the elderly people, like this man, made me feel like my job was important. I enjoyed doing intakes and updates, but giving a person comfort in their situation was very important to me as well.

Although the majority of the clients were incredibly pleasant to speak to, there were some who gave me difficulties to navigate through. One woman for instance was trying to evict a tenant, much like many other clients. This woman, however, did not trust me with the information that she needed to provide. Of course, I wanted to respect her privacy so I wrote an

email to AveMaria explaining the situation, but this was a good look into what dealing with clients day-to-day would be like for me. I am happy that she did not feel pressured to tell me anything that she did not want to, but I am also happy that I got insight into the fact that not every client is going to want to talk to me. This is part of the reality of being a lawyer and I am glad that I got a taste of it now.

One task assigned to me that I thoroughly enjoyed was researching and writing about the Tenant Safe Harbor Act. On June 30, Governor Cuomo signed the Tenant Safe Harbor Act into law, prohibiting evictions of residential tenants, but allowing money judgments for nonpayment of rent, for as long as any part of the county in which such tenant resides is shut down due to COVID-19. AveMaria assigned me to learn about this act and write her an essay in order for her to use this information in current cases. This was especially interesting to me because it is an ongoing issue in the Law Center as well as the rest of the state. The passage of this Act directly affected the work done in Touro Law Center, as well as so many other people. There are real people fighting against eviction and the work that goes on within Touro helps people keep their homes. I am very interested in current events overall, so learning about an Act that was so recently passed was fun for me to do. Doing research on this made me realize that, although cheesy, this fellowship was a piece to something bigger. It makes me feel good that I helped people with such large issues throughout this pandemic.

Although my expectations for this fellowship did not match the reality of the summer I had, I am so glad that I was a part of Touro's Summer Legal Fellows. In a short time, I have gotten better with my computer skills, research skills, and client contact skills. I have learned so much about the tenant eviction process, as well as how to speak to clients who are being evicted.

Working closely with AveMaria was a great experience, and I am so happy to have had a mentor who was so flexible and understanding. I am elated that Touro found a way to incorporate the Summer Legal fellows program despite the ongoing problems of the pandemic. Overall, I am so happy that I gained new experiences and knowledge through this fellowship, and I am so glad that I got to assist people through their problems during such a hard time.