

Mark Rodriguez Summer Legal Fellow Reflection

When I first heard about Siena's summer legal fellow program last October, it immediately had my interest and I knew I needed to find out more from Dr. Cutler on what would be required in order to become a part of this opportunity. Once I was notified after several meetings with Dr. Cutler throughout the school year of my selection to be a summer legal fellow along with Kylie Gilbride at the Touro Law Center, I knew the knowledge I would gain from this eight-week program would be a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Beginning in June, I was exposed to a variety of everyday tasks attorneys themselves are assigned in order to effectively do their job. One of the first tasks I was given was to attend a family court hearing at First District Courthouse of Suffolk County. To see how different attorneys interacted with the judge was fascinating and as the summer went on, I ended up visiting all six district courts in Suffolk County and watching countless other interactions between attorneys and judges.

Besides seeing attorneys have their day in court, I was able to see the initial steps needed in order to be successful when their case is called. Often times I was given the chance to play a crucial role in this process by performing client intakes, writing legal documents, and doing in depth research whenever it was needed.

One lesson I learned from intakes was that no two clients were the same, and I constantly needed to change my approach when asking different clients questions in order to get the most out of each phone call or meeting. Looking back, I definitely gained significant experience building client relationships through the intake process.

Unfortunately, when an intake did not go as planned and we were no longer to help the client, Mrs. Thompson informed us of a few documents that needed to be drawn up for the case's file explaining our decision. Twice during my time at Touro, clients brought evidence to meetings that Mrs. Thompson explained would not be accepted into court as admissible. After these meetings, an "Inadmissible Evidence" document needed to be added to the client's file in case the evidence was mentioned again. Part of this document was stating the issue, rule, analysis, and conclusion of the case, also known as an "IRAC". Another common document for case files was a "Memo to the File". Both of these documents are important ways attorneys keep track of their cases.

Writing notices to quit, notice of petitions, judgement of possessions, and warrants of evictions were other forms of writing I did for Mrs. Thompson and were certainly the most important. After Governor Cuomo signed the new tenant protection laws in the middle of June, there were several times where I needed to call clerks from different district courts as well as the Sheriff of Suffolk County's office in order to confirm my compliance with the law while writing up these documents. This process showed me just how important attention to detail was while also learning how to communicate with different law enforcement and court officials.

Aside from the new tenant laws causing an issue for attorneys and clients, the law center also received phone calls dealing with harassment and orders of protection. A common theme among these clients was a minimal understanding on the requirements needing to be met in order to file a harassment charge. Due to the volume of these calls, Mrs. Thompson asked me to research a change in New York's harassment law that occurred in 2016. After realizing the amendment only covered a small portion of harassment, I went to the library and asked where I

could find more information to better prepare myself for any future calls. The librarian led me to *Mckinney's Consolidated Laws* where I was able to find the "Penal Laws" and narrow down the sections until I found everything I needed to know about harassment laws in New York. After reviewing what I read I summarized each degree and subdivision of harassment and provided a guide to Mrs. Thompson.

I was also lucky enough to observe bankruptcy clinic classes and trial strategy classes while at Touro. The bankruptcy class taught me how to operate the legal software program known as BestCase, which was used by attorneys to file bankruptcy for their clients. When I attended the trial strategy class, the professor was discussing how to effectively ask cross examination questions and held a mock trial focused on the matter. During the second half of the class, Chief Medical Examiner of Suffolk County Michael Caplan spoke to us about the several times he was called in as an expert witness and what questions attorneys should and should not asked when performing a cross examination.

During one of the final weeks of my fellowship, Kylie and I attended the Justice Institute week at the United States Eastern District Court of New York to listen to an abundance of experienced guest speakers discuss their careers and give excellent advice on how they made it to their current position. Later on in the week we witnessed a mock trial tournament involving high school students to see how to conduct a successful trial.

When the last Friday of my fellowship arrived, I looked back on what I accomplished and realized how lucky I was to have such an opportunity given to me by Siena. Not only was I lucky enough to have a school like Siena supporting me throughout this entire process, but the mentorship I received from my staff attorney AveMaria Thompson inspired me to work to the

best of my ability every day. Overall, whether I was in the courtroom, clinic, or the library, my experience as a legal fellow at the Touro Law Center was tremendously gratifying because I knew what I was doing was not only having a positive effect on myself, but on the lives of countless others as well.