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Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



Name: Sorrel Call

Law School: Western State College of Law

Organization: Free to Thrive

Update 1: My second year of law school finished strong, and I have started my internship with Free to Thrive a nonprofit that provides pro bono legal services to survivors of human trafficking. I can't express how thankful I am for the opportunity to be doing what I am doing. I am witnessing myself become more whole as I learn about how trauma manifests in others and myself.

At first, I was hesitant to take an unpaid internship but was grateful to find Equal Justice America, a nonprofit that supports law students giving legal services to those most in need.

Update 2: Interning for Free to Thrive has given me an opportunity to learn about and research collaborative courts. I had heard of drug courts before and knew it was a better alternative for those suffering from substance abuse and addiction, but I didn't know a lot about it. I also didn't know about all the other types of courts. Free to Thrive is hoping to start a collaborative court in Los Angeles to help survivors of human trafficking. To do so we are researching everything we can about the other more widespread collaborative courts: Veterans, Mental Health, Community/homelessness, Drug, Domestic Violence, Reentry, DUI, and Juvenile Court. Doing so has opened my eyes to the other ways justice can be served, ways that are trauma informed and centered on rehabilitation. I came to law school because I felt the justice system was so broken and it is amazing to see how others have felt the same and worked to improve it for certain populations. I hope to take what I have learned and shape it into a career of criminal justice reform that affects everyone who passes through the system, instead of just the people that fit into the narrow categories set out by the current collaborative court systems.

Update 3: Over the last two weeks I have spent more time transitioning from researching collaborative courts to actually seeing them in action. I had the opportunity to go and observe veteran treatment court and drug court. On Tuesday I will have the opportunity to observe the newly created human trafficking court in Los



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Angeles. My research has been in preparation and anticipation of expanding the human trafficking court into more court houses in Los Angeles and potentially further. I look forward to seeing what is in place now and using the research I have done to figure out how to improve and expand this resource.

Observing the collaborative court was very informative and a really incredible opportunity. I came to law school to pursue criminal justice reform that recognizes an individual's humanity. That is something I feel is missing from the traditional criminal justice system. By contrast, collaborative courts care deeply about the individual, their story, their experiences and how each court partner can help the individual in their rehabilitation. The judge asks questions and cares about the individual's success in treatment, their support systems, having access to positive mentors, and the individual's short and long term goals. Seeing the court staff and community partners discuss defendants and their treatment really made the term collaborative court come to life because it really is a collaboration between so many different players who are invested in helping a person succeed.

I am grateful for the Equal Justice America fellowship that has allowed me to be able to intern with an organization and in a capacity that fulfills my goals and passions that lead me to come to law school.

Update 4: This week I want to share an experience that has less to do with the actual work I am doing, and more to do with the person I am becoming and the future lawyer I will be. I have been invited to apply for a post-graduate fellowship with Free to Thrive. I am looking into if it will be a good fit for me and if I would be able to complete the extensive application in time but to me that does not matter as much as the invite itself. I have spent so long doubting myself and my abilities. I often feel inadequate to society's perception of lawyers but I am starting to come around to see myself as my supervisors and professors see me. When I was called and invited to apply for the fellowship, my supervisor explained that they were extending the invitation because my work product has stood out among the interns and all the past interns they have worked with. My supervisor complimented my ability to think critically and do legal analysis. She thanked me for what I add to discussions and the comments I make.

I am so grateful to be an organization that values me and sees a future in me. Whether or not my future ends up being with Free to Thrive, this summer has given me confidence that my future will be spent serving underserved communities through trauma informed lawyering. It has shown me my capabilities to advocate for others and that I want to work with and be the kind of lawyer that supports their colleagues.

Update 5: It is hard to know where to begin to summarize my time spent with Free to Thrive over this summer. I did not have any history or past experience with human trafficking. I interviewed with Free to Thrive because I needed more experience having interviews and I thought their mission and goals were things I could stand behind. Then I saw how the organization worked as a team and I knew I wanted to be a part of the team. I did not know if that would be feasible until I found out about Equal Justice America. I have two children and am



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pregnant so taking an unpaid internship was not really possible. Getting the funding allowed me to take this internship and get my first real experience seeing the things I was learning in school be put into practice.

This summer has shown me that I want to be a lawyer that recognizes every client as a whole person. I really appreciate that Free to Thrive does not only care about the client's legal needs but recognizes that they have other needs that may also need to be addressed. Sometimes that person just needs to be listened to but other times they need a referral to services such as housing, food, mental health providers, etc. The attorneys also showed a recognition for the client's trauma through their example in the way they talk with them and discuss the next steps in their case. I have learned that the work I do in this space is not to save these people but to work alongside them. Survivors of human trafficking are resilient people that do not need me. It is a privilege to be able to work in this space to increase accessibility to the legal world that is gatekept through procedures and technicalities. It is easy to have a savior complex going into public interest work but that can be stripped away as the client is seen as an equal and treated as such.

In my last meeting with my supervising attorneys, one of the attorneys began to cry as she talked about how thankful she was for the opportunity to work with each of us interns. She talked about the hope she has for the legal profession because we will be joining it. Her vulnerability and honesty is something I will think about often. I also wept as I thought about this incredible opportunity coming to its natural end. This internship has been such a blessing because it has brought me in contact with so many people that support me and will continue to be mentors to me. It has also taught me so much about trauma informed lawyering. I know my knowledge in that area is just beginning but I plan to expound upon it and seek out more training and understanding.