



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Update 1: Over the first three weeks of working for the Civil Rights Initiative, I have primarily been working on a quickly developing First Amendment issue in a nearby city in Michigan. It involves an activist organization that the city is unfairly targeting because other members of the community took issue with the group carrying signs protesting the war in Gaza at last year's parade. This year, the city has introduced highly restrictive measures, not allowing any signs except identification signs. The group has reason to believe these measures were targeted at their messaging specifically. They are the only group carrying signs with political messaging, but they were able to advocate for a variety of other issues such as racial justice and ending gun violence without community backlash or resulting parade rule changes in the past.

I have been helping prepare a letter on behalf of the group to the city commission explaining the policy and legal issues the new rules raise and asking them to reverse the rules. In this process, I've gotten better at legal research, learned a lot about how First Amendment protections work, and worked directly with group members in the drafting process. This project has shown me that serious constitutional violations can take place at a local level, and I am grateful clinics like CRLI exist to provide support for community groups like this.

Update 2: For the past few weeks, I have continued to work on First Amendment case research for our Huntington Woods parade case. We received a response letter from the city attorney arguing that the parade is government speech, and therefore the city could legally restrict the Peace Group's speech.

The group wanted us to write a letter in response, so I researched the test for government speech, presented our arguments in one of the Peace Group's meetings, and sent the letter to the city attorney responding to his letter.



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We are not sure if the city will change the rules before the July 4th parade, or what the Peace Group has decided to do in terms of their parade participation, but we have enough background research that we could help them bring a lawsuit after the parade.

Aside from getting more experience with case law and creating arguments that apply precedent to our current case, the most interesting part of this experience has been discussing strategy with my supervisor and the Peace Group. We presented several different options for participation, including not following the sign ban, handing out copies of the First Amendment from the sidewalks of the parade, and marching with blank signs, and watched to see how the group would react, as there had been division over what course of action to take. We are hoping that if the city continues to censor speech, we will be able to bring a lawsuit if the Group agrees.

I have also picked up more archival work for my research project for reparations in Washtenaw County. For this project, I am working under a graduate student and professor and managing an undergrad and high school intern. Learning how to divide the work between us and make sure our communication is consistent has been very helpful in managing this project, and I am learning a lot from others approaches to taking notes and asking questions on the newspaper articles we are reviewing. Previously, the researchers had not had a detailed review of all the newspaper coverage, and I am grateful to be able to help fill in these gaps this summer.

Update 3: For the past two weeks the focus of my internship has moved from the First Amendment case I spent the early part of the summer working on to community outreach efforts for Justice InDeed. The city of Huntington Woods did not remove the Peace Group participants from the parade and has not otherwise reacted to the group carrying signs protesting the war in Gaza or any other signage that went beyond the identifying banner restrictions in the new rules. The Group is not currently planning to sue, and there is no sign the city is acting to ban them from next year's parade yet, so we have wrapped up our representation for the time being. Our letters to the city manager and city attorney, along with the press outreach we did, resulted in several articles in local newspapers. Pictures from the parade included photos of people in the community carrying signs voicing the importance of free speech. I am grateful to be doing work that helps groups facing unconstitutional restrictions gain attention for both their cause as well as the importance of protecting civil rights more broadly in the community.

Justice InDeed is an initiative through CRLI to educate Ann Arbor community members about racially restrictive covenants in their housing deeds. I put together fliers and an outreach team to canvas in three subdivisions in Ann Arbor. This past weekend, we canvassed at over 100 houses across the three subdivisions. Reception was very positive, and many people who did not



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know they had racially restrictive language in their housing deeds were eager to take on the repeal process. I was canvassing with a group of high school and undergraduate students who had never done this work before, and it was encouraging to see them gain comfortability talking with residents and connecting with the community. I plan to set up more canvassing sessions around Ann Arbor this summer and am excited to continue engaging with the community directly.

Update 4: Since my last update, I have begun working on two more First Amendment cases. I have gotten to expand on the research and work I did writing the Huntington Woods demand letter early this summer in this experience, and have found that researching the issues and relevant case law has become a faster process overall.

I am excited to have had the opportunity to learn so much about different aspects of the First Amendment and experience writing about it ahead of taking the First Amendment class next year.

Something I personally struggled with during my undergraduate career was seeing how the theories I learned about in school translated into real-world applications. This summer, jumping directly into writing demand letters pushed me to learn about the First Amendment on my own, and I got to see the immediate relevance to the different clients I have been helping. From ensuring a peace group can advocate against war at a public parade to maintaining the public's rights to protest in public parks, I am seeing the tangible ways the skills I have been building in legal research and writing can serve our clients, and members of the public at large, through clinic representation. I am excited to go into classes next semester with a better sense of how what I learn applies in practice, and to use the experiences I have had this summer as motivation to continue improving my skills to help clients in the future.

Final Reflection: I first became interested in civil rights law because I wanted to help others and make sure members of the public were educated about their constitutional rights. However, except for cases I followed in the news, "helping people" remained nebulous. I had experience working with customers and students in previous jobs serving and being a teaching assistant, but I lacked experience working with clients in stressful periods of their lives.

Over the course of my ten weeks working for the Civil Rights Litigation Initiative, "helping people" stopped being an abstraction and took on identifiable forms: sitting in a Peace Group meeting watching members debate whether to risk city action for carrying signs, reviewing a woman's experience with potential racial profiling by police software, or knocking on a stranger's door and watching as I told them their house's deed contained racially restrictive language they'd never known about. Law is a service profession, but it was difficult to see this



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from classes alone. Working in the clinic showed me the importance of showing up for clients, keeping track of correspondence and details, and being present in day-to-day interactions.

What surprised me most this summer was the range of issues that fall under civil rights work. I came in expecting to focus on First Amendment and racial justice issues, and I did get to build experience there, researching government speech doctrine, drafting demand letters, and watching a small city parade dispute unfold into a test of who gets to speak in public spaces. But I also spent weeks combing through decades-old newspaper archives for the Washtenaw County reparations project, and days canvassing subdivisions for Justice InDeed, explaining racist housing covenants to residents on their front porches. These felt like entirely different kinds of work, legal research versus community organizing versus historical archival review. However, they were all about the same thing: making sure people understood the rights and history that affect their daily lives and giving them tools to act on that understanding. That mission is why I first chose the clinic, as well as why I chose to attend law school.

I was also given more responsibility than I expected, both in terms of client-facing work and in managing the undergraduate and high school interns on the reparations project. Learning to delegate research tasks, keep our notes consistent, and answer their questions about material I was still learning myself pushed me to understand the project more deeply than if I had just been doing it alone.

I am going into this next year of law school with a different relationship to what I am learning. When I think about what kind of lawyer I want to be, I go back to the range of this summer. I canvassed door-to-door alongside practicing legal writing, because the public's needs, not the prestige of the task, defined the work. I'm grateful to CRLI for trusting me with that range and I know it will shape how I approach both my classes and my future career.