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Summer Legal Fellows Reflection

Dr. Leonard Cutler

Touro Law Center Reflection

This summer, I had the privilege of serving at Touro Law Center, located in Central Islip, NY, as a Siena College Summer Legal Fellow. Touro Law Center itself consists of the actual law school where classes are held and research is conducted as well as the clinical section, where many of Touro's staff attorneys work. Within Touro's clinic, I worked in the Senior Citizens Law Program under the direction of AveMaria Thompson, Esq., and alongside my colleague, also a Summer Legal Fellow, Mark Rodriguez. This type of work is pro bono, meaning that clients are not obligated to pay fees of any kind; the only two requirements that clients must fulfill is that they reside in Suffolk County and that they are 60 years of age or older.

Among my first couple of days in the Senior Citizens Law Program, I quickly learned how important initial phone calls with clients are. An intake form must be completed for every new client; intake forms consist of basic information such as the client's name, address, phone number, income status, other demographically-based information, and of course, case notes. In my opinion, the case notes are the most integral part of the intake form because that is essentially the client's legal issue and everything else that is relevant to that.

One of the first, and most significant, skills AveMaria taught me to use when calling or meeting with a client is to build a timeline of events. Building a timeline is so essential because it allows you to create the most clear and concrete understanding of the legal issue at hand; it is

also important so that you and the client can be on the same page. Timeline building is also necessary because once it is constructed, those notes will then be kept in the client's file, which other attorneys and/or law students will then read; the timeline that you provide will allow for everyone to know the same facts and sequence of those facts, thereby squashing the potential for any sort of miscommunication or misunderstandings.

A major advantage of being a Summer Legal Fellow at Touro is its proximity to the Federal Courthouse and First District Court. There are Six Districts in total, and I am grateful that I have been able to visit and experience each and every one. The courthouse that we frequented the most was certainly Fifth District, where most of our landlord/tenant cases were handled. Attending court a minimum of once a week truly allowed me to learn proper courtroom etiquette and see how legal proceedings are actually carried out. Going to all of the district courthouses also allowed me to observe different judges and how each of them embodies their own styles and approaches. Most of AveMaria's cases this summer were able to be settled with a stipulation, which is an agreement reached by both parties, in order to avoid a trial. It was really here, at court, post-stipulation, that I truly got to witness how appreciative clients were for AveMaria's assistance and how much of an impact legal representation directly has on clients' lives.

Because most of the cases we heard this summer were landlord/tenant related, I have become very familiar with composing Notice of Petitions, which are one of the preliminary steps of beginning the eviction process. I also wrote a significant amount of Memos to File, which are basically letters for a client's file that clearly and reasonably define why we cannot take their case, fundamentally based on the facts and issues with the information that we were given. A

notable Memo to File that I wrote was about how a landlord's receipt book was considered inadmissible evidence; this required me to research what constitutes as evidence and what will not be accepted by the court, based on rules, regulations, and case law.

Other ways in which my legal writing skills were substantially improved was by composing different types of legal documents such as a Narrative, Warrants of Judgements post hearing, as well as decision after trial letter. Another task I had to carry out was explaining documents to clients before they signed them, indicating their comprehension and agreement; some of these include Living Wills, Healthcare Proxies, Pool Trusts, and Notice of Petitions. AveMaria also made sure to demonstrate how to conduct legal research through WestLaw as well as how records are kept of each case through the program, Time Matters.

A major project that I had this summer was in regards to the Center for Disability Rights, Inc. My client had recently become the healthcare proxy for her husband, and was unsure how to go about paying his bills for him since he was no longer able to do so. With this being the issue at hand, I was required to carry out extensive research via the Center for Disability Rights, Inc., to which I found a Withdrawal form that she would need to complete as well as submit copies of each bill to the agency on a monthly basis. I later then created a step-by-step guide that my client, and other future clients, could then easily follow during a difficult and confusing time to ensure that all payments are made in a timely, and correct, manner.

One of my favorite days of my Touro experience is when I sat in on an Expert Witness Class. It was in this class that I observed how council should effectively question an expert witness, the types of questions that should be asked, the types of answers that should be provided, and what must be discovered during the research stage. This day was particularly

invaluable because the Suffolk County Medical Examiner actually came into class, discussed a case, and provided both verbal and visual explanations and support regarding that case. He also explained his job and the role that he plays in the legal system; he was also open to any and all questions that came his way, which is such a unique opportunity.

My summer at Touro was as eventful as could be in the best possible way. I always assumed that I would enter the legal field, but my time at Touro was truly defining in helping me realize that this is the kind of work I want to do in life. My experience would not have been as impactful as it was without working with an amazing partner like Mark or without the support, guidance, and direction of AveMaria; she was truly the best mentor for rising college seniors to have while seriously considering the legal profession. It was truly an honor to represent Siena College as a Summer Legal Fellow at Touro; what I have learned, experienced, and the connections I have made this summer has been an absolute highlight of my college career. Thank you, again, Dr. Cutler, for this priceless opportunity.