

### The Lens of a Legal Project Volunteer at the AOC

This summer, I had the opportunity to intern for the Tennessee Supreme Court by taking on the responsibilities of a legal project volunteer for the Administrative Office of the Courts. As the child of two immigrants who do not have bachelor's degrees, throughout my youth I received little exposure to the professional career field of law. When I received this internship, I barely knew the function of courts, the daily life of a lawyer, or the reason the Supreme Court of Tennessee needed an "administrative office." However, as an aspiring attorney hoping to enter law school within the next three years, these pieces of knowledge were pertinent, if not mandatory, to the understanding of my field of interest. My eight-week internship gave me a comprehensive, behind-the-scenes experience that allowed me to differentiate between state and private institutions; meet and interact with an array of attorneys and judges; and learn tools and tips for leading a professional career. Not only did I gain what I consider to be a new mentor in my life, but I was able to grasp, on a broader scale, the meaning and purpose of the courts of Tennessee and, more specifically, what it takes to run them.

As a legal project volunteer under the communications division, my job description was to "work alongside the Director of Communications on projects that include public education, outreach, some legal research, and project-based tasks regarding the judiciary and its role." On my first day, my supervisor and I established guidelines as to what my supervisor required of me and what I was seeking. This practice in itself gave me insight as to how this office functions: employees contribute to a team effort to uplift the courts, and the team gives back by providing fulfilling experiences and professional relationships. The goals I set for myself were to improve my writing, understand organizations' use of social media, navigate a new organizational structure, learn specific workplace etiquette, sharpen my professional values, and better my self-

management skills. My supervisor briefed me on some of the projects I would become a part of: press releases, interviews with judges, creating maps and spreadsheets for the TNcourts.gov website, and editing the Criminal Justice Handbook as it underwent updates.

Because the web-mapping project was so robust, I began working on it my first day and realized that it would take several weeks to complete. It was my first long-term non-academic project, which was a challenge; on some days, I felt that I was accomplishing nothing because my goal was so distant. I was also working with Excel, which took a while to get used to because of my lack of experience. One of my first lessons was to understand that instant gratification in projects comes every once in a blue moon. With that said, my supervisor showed her leadership skills by checking on me and making sure I had small projects to work on as well. I wrote two press releases that were published on the TNcourts.gov website within the first three weeks of my internship, and my supervisor meticulously edited and commented so I could gain experience in the type of writing that comes from their offices; I have been a student journalist for all of my college career, so learning how to write purely positive and promotional pieces was a new skill. At first I felt incompetent, as each edit came back bleeding red pen, but writing for the website became easier, and one major highlight in this part of my job was that my third press release for the AOC was picked up by [TheChattanooga.com](http://TheChattanooga.com), Chattanooga's online daily newspaper.

By the end of the summer I was entrusted with more projects, one of which involved writing a profile of Chancellor Carol McCoy. Some of my smaller projects included creating an annual list of administrative updates and proofreading judge obituaries, so the project of interviewing a retiring Chancellor was gigantic in its level of responsibility and honor. This was the first of many times I found myself spending hours researching the history of judges and learning of the delicate relationship between court news reporters and staff of the AOC. McCoy was a

long-standing Chancellor involved with a number of cases, including one with John Jay Hooker, a Sewanee alum. (Coincidentally, I had recently compiled his obituary as a work-study employee in Sewanee's Office of Marketing & Communications.) In researching Chancellor McCoy I found that McCoy had strong opinions about all of her cases – and made that clear to journalists who requested quotes. Getting in touch with Chancellor McCoy involved using a confidential handbook that I was prohibited from taking home, as the handbook contained judges' photos, email addresses, home addresses, and phone numbers. McCoy and I were in email correspondence until I interviewed her in early July. I was then entrusted with writing her profile, as she was to retire on September 1, 2016. To me, that experience was nerve-wracking but somehow familiar because of my experience as a journalist at Sewanee. This profile was published on the [Tncourts.gov](http://Tncourts.gov) website after I left.

My supervisor often iterated that many of our projects strive to make the courts more accessible to everyone, no matter what disability they have, language they speak, or how much money they make. In that way, what I considered a downside to being too close to the action turned into a positive – many of the documents I proofread, and a project to recreate a citizens' guide to the courts, proved to me that the organization I worked for was working toward the goal of mending the sometimes strained relationship between the courts and the people. Many of my co-workers led projects that promoted pro bono work and court openness. A fellow intern, in fact, worked on one document that helped criminals reestablish their voting rights.

While I don't think I will pursue a career in law administration, I observed many positives of working for a state agency, which allowed many employees to balance their careers and families – it appeared that, in many cases, working in the private sector makes it challenging for employees to find that balance. While that wasn't true of every private-sector lawyer I met, it

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was something I know I have to take into consideration in the future. I was thankful to see what living a balanced life was like for the people at the Administrative Office of the Courts. I am extremely grateful for this opportunity and exposure to the field of law.