

Eastern District Court of Kentucky – Frankfort, KY

In the summer of 2016 I worked in the U.S. justice system. Such a remark is not often heard from an international student. It is quite uncommon for visa-holder students to get hired by a governmental body and I am forever thankful for Judge Van Tatenhove for offering me such an incredible opportunity! Having spent the last three years in the States I have learned much about the judicial process, however, I wanted to gain first-hand experiences about the seemingly complicated system.

During my first day in the Eastern District Court of Kentucky, I was given a thick file of medical reports and appeals – my first Social Security case! I felt somewhat intimidated, to say the least, my knowledge of the Social Security Act was murky at best. Looking back at that day, I don't think I could have started with a better project. Not only did I learn about all stages of a Social Security case but also about the different levels of jurisdiction and the importance of appeals rights. By the time a case about benefits and supplemental income gets to the district court, the file has been reviewed several times and appealed repeatedly. The most important task of writing a summary judgment draft is to make sure that the initial decision was made following the appropriate laws. This can, at times, distract us from realizing that our decision will greatly influence a human life. Sometimes we can get lost in the medical and legal jargon in the file and lose track of the very personal aspect of a case. Fortunately, I worked with wonderful law clerks and a very involved judge who made sure I remembered! While writing my first draft Summary Judgment was rather stressful and took a long time, I gained a useful skill that I was able to utilize for the rest of my internship and hope to use in the future as well.

While the Social Security cases are decided on without personal contact, a trial can be described as everything but that. I was quite excited to see my first trial and more importantly for me, my first jury selection (*voir dire*). Coming from a country where juries are not part of the justice system, I had reservations about the idea of a jury. I can say that having seen them in action, I am even more conflicted than before. I've seen both the positive and negative sides of being a juror and honestly, I feel somewhat relieved I will not be part of such a process for the foreseeable future. At the time of the verdict, the jurors seemed to carry the weight of the world on their shoulders and while they were confident in their decision, they were painfully aware of the outcome of their guilty verdict. I have the uttermost respect for everyone who has served on a jury before.

After the jury selection, the trial began and we were told the case involved a violation of the Clean Water Act – not necessarily a case you often see in a criminal court. In fact, Judge Van Tatenhove created precedent in the district by authorizing and organizing a jury view, where the jury, counsel and the court were ushered to the alleged crime scene by the U.S. marshals. Said crime scene was near a creek in the forest that very much reminded me of the beauty of Sewanee and made the case more personal for me. While I understand why the United States' attorney wanted the jury to see the scene, I am not sure why the defence did not object, let alone support the jury view motion. Nevertheless, the jury view was an unusual event on the trial schedule and a unique experience for most of us.

Not only was I fortunate to see a trial, but also many sentencing procedure, arraignments and rearraignments where the defendants were more willing to share their thoughts and often use their opportunity to speak as a way to talk about how remorseful they feel about their acts and how they wish their families did not have to go through such

painful experiences. These procedures were the most striking reminders of how decisions in the court affect everyone involved.

One of the most fascinating events during my internship involved the idea of citizenship. I had the opportunity to see both extremes; a deportation and a naturalization ceremony. I think not many people realize how happy, yet somewhat painful of an experience a naturalization ceremony can be for individuals. The years of sweat and tears finally show the light at the end of the tunnel, yet you are given one last, if only symbolic, hurdle; the denunciation of your country of origin. Nevertheless, those new citizens fortunate to have their naturalization in Judge Van Tatenhove's chambers were reminded that the oath of citizenship does not mean forgetting one's heritage. Judge shared a beautiful story of his own Dutch ancestry and asked the people to always be proud of their heritage just as well their new U.S. citizenship.

While I have spent considerable time in the trial chambers of both Frankfort and London, KY, most of my projects were outside of those chambers. My second project, following the Social Security cases, was a great way to learn more about the trial process and see what other trials Judge had in the past. I have read and summarized his trials from the past year as well as created a handbook of all his district court trials using and updating trial summaries written by past Sewanee interns. I also had the opportunity to learn more about the sentencing process by helping Judge prepare for a course he will teach in the fall on the subject. I also had smaller projects, such as updating the law library with the 2016 additions, read and research habeas corpus cases and prison letters, write attorney's excess fee motions and help the law clerks prepare for their upcoming trials.

My internship in the chambers of Judge Van Tatenhove provided me with a unique perspective of the judicial process. Working with him and his law clerks showed me how important it is to be aware of the human life on the line and make the fairest decision possible for everyone involved. Seeing their devotion and commitment to not only the justice system but the people in the system inspired and motivated me to keep learning about the legislative and judicial system and help people explore their rights and duties under the law so they fully understand the outcomes of their acts and decisions. While I do not see myself practicing law as a future career, I will expand and utilize my knowledge of the judicial process in not only my career but also all aspects of my life.

I am so thankful for the memories Judge Van Tatenhove and his clerks gave me and I can only hope that more and more students will apply and have the same experience I had.