

Annie Blanks
August 5th, 2014

DCS Summer Internship with James Stephens

During the summer of 2014, I was an intern for the legal department at the Tennessee Department of Children's Services in Tullahoma, TN. My supervisor was Attorney James Stephens, Assistant General Counsel, who is one of only six attorneys for fourteen counties in the South Central Region of the Department.

Before beginning the internship, when thinking of the duties and responsibilities I would have as a legal intern, I assumed I would be taking on the monotonous tasks typically associated with being at the bottom of the ladder in the field of law—filing mountains of paper in shiny cabinets, sitting at a wooden desk licking envelopes, and getting early-onset arthritis from taking notes at boring court hearings. I accepted that I would have to perform these tasks as part of my initiation into the career of law and, to be quite honest, my primary goal going into the internship was the same as most first-time interns': to earn a fancy snippet about having experience in the professional workforce to add to my résumé.

However, by the end of my first week at DCS, I had forgotten about my résumé entirely. Without even realizing it, my fancy snippet goal had disappeared. Instead, it was replaced with much more meaningful and short-term goals that had nothing to do with myself: saving children from abusive parents, helping mothers and fathers get into rehab, and reuniting families, among other things. I quickly realized this internship was going to be more than pencil pushing and stamp-sticking; although, I did end up doing all of the duties I had expected to do. Yes, there

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were mountains of paperwork in shiny cabinets; but they contained thousands of pages of medical records, child testimonies, police reports, and other case information about real children in real trouble that I was responsible for reading and summarizing for James to help him prepare for court. Yes, I sat at a wooden desk, but it quickly became cluttered with pictures of families I had a small part in helping reunite, and the envelopes I licked at that desk were often letters to parents instructing them to come to court if they wanted to see their kids. And yes, I'm probably close to developing early-onset arthritis from note-taking, but it was well worth getting to sit at the counsel table next to James and seeing firsthand everything from Jerry Springer-style paternity battles to Oprah-style family reunifications.

Still, my responsibilities and experiences extended well beyond the legal department. The DCS Tullahoma office is the workplace of Child Protective Services (CPS) Investigators, Social Workers, and James, the sole attorney. It also contains conference rooms where children and families come for meetings. I was able to assist everyone in the office, not just James, and learn about all aspects of child welfare and family law. I shadowed CPS Investigators on home visits, jail visits, and drug tests (which requires you to actually physically watch a person urinate into a cup...seriously). I sat in with social workers on Child and Family Team Meetings, which sometimes became heated, allowing me to become familiar with local law enforcement as well. I babysat kids in the playroom while their recovering addict parents were in the next room having a meeting.

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The opportunity to immerse myself in all aspects of the Department meant that the children and families I was reading about in files and hearing about in court grew to be not just names on paper to me. Actually meeting people, learning their stories, seeing their bruises (both the visible and invisible ones), and working together with everyone in the Department to try and help them meant that all of the “busy work” I did, didn’t feel like busy work at all. James invested a lot of his time ensuring that I understood the importance of the work I was doing, and even more time teaching me how to translate my desire to help into actual legal action. Whether it was drafting orders and petitions, issuing subpoenas, researching past cases, searching for statutes, or organizing depositions, I learned so much about law without even realizing I was learning.

That’s why, by the end of the internship, I didn’t even remember to add the fancy snippet about being a legal intern to my résumé until Career Services reminded me about it. My internship with DCS didn’t feel like a job to add to a sheet of paper, it felt like a new page of my own story that I wanted to both re-read and add to. It has helped to inform the choices I’m now making for my future, including my steel resolve to go to law school, and has helped me to understand that the less-glamorous, less financially lucrative law is something I’d like to explore. DCS helped me to merge my passion for helping those less fortunate with my propensity for (successful!) argumentation, and that, fostered by the blessing of higher education I’ve received at Sewanee and the resources generously given to me by the Tonya Scholarship, has set me on a path I can’t wait to travel.