

Melissa Blue

One of the best things to come out of my summer as an intern was a renewed sense of inspiration to do public interest work. In many ways after my first year of law school I felt deeply jaded about the legal institutions that we as students are preparing to join. While I will always be critical of these systems, I feel grateful to have interned at Columbia Legal Services (CLS) because of how committed, caring, and inspiring the attorneys and staff were.

As an advocacy intern, my work this summer centered on the “Ending Mass Incarceration” goal/value of CLS. All the projects I worked on were responsive to cases related to the rights of incarcerated individuals or to their requests. I was also fortunate enough to attend a farmworker outreach training and other trainings and discussions that provided context for the way that CLS does work and what that work translates to in community.

Prior to coming to law school, I knew that whatever work I did in the future needed to be community centered. I have been able to experience different work environments, and so I want to prioritize community in any legal work that I do. For that reason, it was exciting and relieving to intern at an organization that wants to center community needs and voices in the work that they do. It was interesting to learn more about the process that CLS goes through to decide what advocacy they will perform in response to requests from community members and groups. Notably, that work doesn’t always entail litigation. I appreciated the sentiment of de-centering lawyers’ wants or needs from advocacy work. One thing that resonated with me was a lesson in being mindful of the power imbalances and space-taking that can occur when an attorney is in a room with various community members—it was ultimately a reminder to step back. That practice is something I mean to take into my own future as I learn how to navigate community work with legal skills. That “lesson,” while important on its own, was also indicative of the type of people I was lucky enough to be surrounded by for the summer.

On the skills side—my longer-term project for the summer was a memo responsive to a constitutional research question. While I haven’t taken constitutional law in school yet, I was excited to work on this memo and it ended up being quite the journey. I was almost surprised to see how the skills I learned in Legal Writing transferred to this work. I definitely had a mental blueprint that I was thinking of as I researched and wrote. At the same time, it was interesting to figure out how to adjust my skills to the task at hand because it wasn’t the type of research or writing that I was accustomed to from my first year.

As a 1L student I had found myself dreading the time that I had to spend writing because nothing I wrote ever felt quite right. I initially found myself feeling the same way about this larger memo at my internship, but being able to talk through the process of researching and writing bolstered my confidence in a way that I hadn’t experienced yet. I also walked away with some newfound growth in terms of just forcing myself to get started. Ultimately, I’m glad to have written something that I am proud of, and that feels like it was meaningful work.

Overall, the experience was just what I needed to reinvigorate my passion for public interest/social justice work and make it through the next couple years of school, excited for the future.