

Eric Strain PILF Reflection

This summer, I had the incredible opportunity to intern with the Tacoma pro bono Community Lawyers for their Family Safety Project. Our program provides grant-funded, pro bono legal services for survivors of domestic violence or violent crimes seeking help with family law matters. Our office assists with various legal issues, from domestic violence protection orders to parenting plans and family law issues.

I worked primarily on dissolutions with children cases. Dissolution is the legal term of art in Washington for divorce. Working on these cases, I had the opportunity to see every step of the dissolution process. From initial filings to observing trial judgments, it was rewarding for me to see the impact of pro bono legal services at every phase. I observed a contested parenting plan that presented an interesting intersection of criminal and family law. The dissolution process usually takes many months to complete, so I was grateful to assist my supervisor with an ever-expanding set of complex legal issues.

It was shocking how useful the research I had conducted in Legal Writing became during my internship. In addition to using actual research from a class and saving myself research time, I was surprised to implement the various organizational tools I had learned in the last two years during trial prep. While not representing anyone, I felt my confidence grow with each draft returned with less and less redlining. This confidence and organization proved pivotal to completing the various research assignments thrown my way throughout my summer.

This summer, my main research project focused on producing self-help materials for LGBT+ parents and children to navigate the Pierce County Family Law courts. This project quickly led me down multiple interesting legal avenues. However, this project showed me the importance of looking beyond the case law to form and understand legal arguments.

While working on my research project, I became familiar with the nuances of Washington family law and the strides that still need to be made to stop LGBT+ legal discrimination. I also became aware of the hole in Washington case law that remains silent on the matter of transgender discrimination when determining the amount of residential time a parent will have with their child. This internship allowed me to explore the legal arguments that may advance the rights of LGBT+ parents in Washington.

During this experience, I attended weekly meetings to discuss the status of cases, share new research, and check in on clients' statuses. Being on a team of folks diligently working for so many different clients simultaneously was incredible. Each meeting brought a new set of issues that the Family Safety Project staff would assist in navigating me through. Working in an office for the first time elevated my internship experience. While I have enjoyed remote opportunities, working alongside the Family Safety Project team gave me a unique connection to the Tacoma area that I will cherish.

I am leaving this opportunity with a deep appreciation for the work that domestic violence advocates provide our communities. Although this was an emotionally difficult practice area, I look forward to bringing the skills I learned to any civil legal aid organization in the future.