

Bina Patel '16: IHRLC 2015 Summer Fellow with ACLU

The International Human Rights Law Clinic (“IHRLC”) Alumni Fellowship funded my summer as a legal intern at the American Civil Liberties Union, Immigrants’ Rights Project (“ACLU-IRP”). The ACLU-IRP, much like human rights law, relies on principles of civil rights and constitutional due process and equal protection concerns to advance the rights of particularly vulnerable populations. The ACLU-IRP advocates for immigrants primarily through strategic impact litigation and legal advocacy. Much of my work this past summer entailed drafting legal memoranda for cases regarding the legal representation of immigrant detainees with mental disabilities, due process rights of unaccompanied minors crossing the border from Central America, and racial profiling as a result of SB 1070 legislation (which authorizes law enforcement to demand individuals present their “papers” to confirm their immigration status if they are suspected of being in the U.S. unlawfully).

Prior to enrolling in the IHRLC, former students stressed the heavy research and writing component of the Clinic. Students informed me that I would be hard-pressed to find such thorough attention to my research and writing elsewhere in the law school setting. True to my expectations, as an IHRLC student intern during my 2L year, I drafted two human rights reports; both were subjected to dozens of drafts with careful line-editing, peer and professor evaluations, and feedback on research and source support. In Fall 2014, I submitted a report to the United Nations on the medico-legal definition of torture as it pertains to Guantánamo detainees and the need for redress for former detainees who are victims of torture under the Convention against Torture. As a returning IHRLC student intern in Spring 2015, I drafted a second report applying international human rights standards to the issue of sexual violence in armed conflict. I walked into both semesters with limited knowledge of these topics but was, nevertheless, required to jump head first into the deep end.

During my summer internship at the ACLU-IRP, I quickly realized the value of the research and writing skills I honed throughout my clinical experience. From day one at my summer internship, I was asked to tackle a research question that did not necessarily have a clear-cut answer and about which I had very little background knowledge. When presenting the results of my research to an attorney, I was surprised when he treated me as though I were an “expert” on the legal issue at hand. In that moment, I was reminded of one of my first IHRLC team meetings on the sexual violence work. We had just been assigned to research a foreign legal system, about which we knew nothing. Sensing our anxiety at the prospect of entering the “black hole” of legal research, my clinical supervisor encouraged us to conduct ourselves in the coming weeks as though we were the authority on this topic; she cultivated in us a sense of ownership over our research. The IHRLC requires clinical interns to become “experts” on topics that they might never have confronted before and in doing so, creates researchers who are willing to tackle any legal question. I channeled this confidence into the various research assignments I was given during my summer internship.

In addition to legal research, my summer at the ACLU-IRP entailed a significant amount of legal writing; I drafted nearly one-hundred pages worth of memoranda on a range of research topics in furtherance of the organization’s immigrant rights’ efforts. The uniqueness of the

IHRLC is its emphasis on providing law students with constructive feedback on their legal writing. As a clinical student, my peers and supervisors regularly provided me with written and verbal input on the substance and style of my writing. Because every aspect of my legal writing was closely scrutinized in the IHLRC, I entered my summer internship a much more self-aware writer. I credit the IHRLC for the positive feedback I ultimately received on my writing at the ACLU-IRP.

In sum, I am extremely honored to have represented the IHRLC through the Alumni Fellowship program. As a legal intern at the ACLU-IRP, I not only worked on immigrants' rights issues in furtherance of the IHRLC's mission and the objectives of international human rights law, but I also heavily relied on the skillset I was fortunate enough to build as a result of the Clinic's mentorship and guidance.