

## **Evelyn Rangel-Medina '16: 2015 IHRLC Summer Fellow ROC-United**

The International Human Rights Law Clinic positively transformed my experience at Berkeley Law. Throughout the Spring semester, I worked on the Clinic's Tipped Worker's Project and helped develop an international human rights framework to analyze the working conditions of tipped workers in the restaurant industry. Along with immersing myself in international human rights standards, my voice as a human rights legal advocate flourished. I also felt connected to a larger movement to advance human rights protections for low-wage workers throughout the United States. At the culmination of last semester, I decided to apply for the IHRLC Alumni Fellowship to extend my clinic experience as a human rights legal advocate. I chose to continue working with our client, the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC-United). This is a national organizing and policy advocacy organization that uses a tri-pronged model of change to build power and voice for low-income restaurant workers.

I felt personally connected to ROC-United's work because my aunt worked as a tipped server in a chain restaurant for over twenty years. I remember feeling excited when she would come home from work and she would let me count the cash she received in tips. I dreamt of becoming a restaurant worker like her one-day. However, as I grew up, I started to witness the immense vulnerabilities she faced as a low-income, immigrant, woman of color working in a highly exploitative environment that deemed her disposable. Unfortunately, not much has changed for the one-in-ten American workers who are part of the restaurant industry today. Even though restaurant workers work long hours, most of them live in poverty and face higher food insecurity rates than the U.S. general workforce. Via my IHRLC Alumni Fellowship at ROC-United, I wanted to pay tribute to my aunt's sacrifice by advocating for workers who are similarly situated to her.

Throughout the summer, I helped ROC-United develop a research project that analyzed the origins and historical development of the tipping system in the United States, which is connected to the abolition of slavery and to the availability of a highly exploitative Black labor force. Furthermore, I conducted extensive legal research of the federal subminimum wage for tipped workers, which is set at \$2.13 an hour. I also studied the efforts in various states to eliminate the two-tiered wage system and provide access to a living wage for all workers of at least \$15 an hour. This research will help advance ROC-United's advocacy efforts by demonstrating the need for all workers to have access to a minimum wage that, at very minimum, provides them with a living wage. I connected this research to ROC's chapter in Washington D.C. I was also able to incorporate the international human rights framework I learned through my Clinic experience to ROC's organizing and policy advocacy efforts.

The experience of working as an IHRLC Alumni Fellow in a burgeoning worker's rights movement nationally helped solidify my commitment to become a human rights attorney. The opportunity of working in a growing and thriving worker's rights organization like ROC-United has been unparalleled. Through this experience, I was able to apply the skills and knowledge I learned as a clinical student and to grow my voice as a human rights legal advocate. I am grateful to have been selected as a Fellow and look forward to

the opportunity to support future Clinic students once I graduate, both as a benefactor and mentor.