

Internship Opens Eyes on Farm Workers' World

By Michael Khalili

I could not have scripted a better internship after my first year of law school. I heard about the Laurel Rubin Farm Worker Justice Internship from Joan Tierney, a counselor at Seattle University School of Law, and we thought I would be perfect for it. After speaking with a former Laurel Rubin intern, Erin Glass, and hearing the endless praises of her experience, I was sold.

Needless to say, I was not disappointed. I was not looking for an internship that simply locked you in a room with a stack of memos to research and write, but an internship that was hands on.

Growing up in a small border town in southwest Texas, I saw many minorities being taken advantage of and still only had a tip-of-the-iceberg grasp of the problems that saturated the farm worker population. I wanted to see exactly what the farm workers were going through, so I could get the insight and substance needed to be an effective advocate. The Laurel Rubin Internship gave me that opportunity.

Meetings and Trainings

I established my goals from the first meeting the Yakima Columbia Legal Services office had. In that meeting, managing attorney Lori Isley asked what my priorities were and continually assisted and nurtured them throughout the summer. From that point on, I felt at ease asking any question or bringing up any problem I had throughout the summer.

During the first week, I attended an intern farm worker law training session in Yakima. This was a valuable, concise introduction to farm worker law. Later, I attended the statewide summer law clerk orientation in Seattle for law clerks working at all of the legal service providers throughout the state. This session enlightened us on the projects other law clerks were working on and the synergy among the service providers in Washington. The structure also helped me visualize each organization as a valuable piece to an effective legal community foundation.

Community Education

One of my duties for community education was visiting daycare centers for the children of migrant workers in Mattawa and Wapato and giving presentations to the parents on the basic rights

of farm workers. This was a great way to expand on my Spanish skills and gain confidence in a group-speaking setting. I typically spoke about the rights of farm workers; minimum wage; what to do if the farm owner does not pay their wages; pesticides; and temporary H-2A workers.

A detailed description of the information was available for them via the farm worker newspaper, *El Faro Legal*, that we passed out and which contained all contact information for offices with farm worker advocates in the state. This interaction really enhanced the farm workers' curiosity and enabled a more comfortable environment to address their issues.

I also provided information about various topics on Radio Cadena (La Voz del Campesino - The Voice of the Farm worker) in a one-hour interview. I talked about myself, advice I would give people thinking about law school, the work I had been doing, and farm worker rights. This was an interesting task that I was very nervous about because the information would reach the most farm workers I had ever spoken to.

We structured the interview in a format where Maria D. Garcia (another Laurel Rubin intern working in Kennewick) and I were asked questions by Isley. The first part of the show covered background information about ourselves and recommendations and/or advice we had for high school and college students contemplating going to law school. The second part was devoted to discussing the most important case each of us had worked on and how it affected the farm worker community. We also provided information about farm worker rights, how to contact Columbia Legal Services, and a message from each of us to the farm worker community.

Outreach

Probably the most fulfilling tasks were the community outreach assignments. I could see and feel my confidence and approach evolve each time I talked to groups of farm workers about their rights as workers in Washington.

We traveled to Mattawa, the Tri-Cities, Wenatchee and Othello, which took me to parts of Washington I probably never would have seen. I began talking to groups and having conversations with farm workers, who responded with questions that seemed to be weigh-

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ing on their minds. It was a great feeling to have won their confidence as well as gain some for myself.

Legal Research and Case Involvement

I had a variety of interesting assignments that made the time spent both exciting and educational. Most of my time in the office was strategically used for legal research and memo writing on various aspects of the major case we were working on, *Perez v. Global Horizons*.

I felt extremely fortunate to be interning at this particular time. Isley was at the helm of this case and was exceptionally helpful in incorporating me into this action. I was deeply involved and even got to attend the class certification hearing in District Court. This was perhaps the most exciting part of the summer. I met the magistrate and the opposing counsel, and was witness to the hearing on our motion for class certification.

CLS attorney Laura Contreras did a superb job on our argument and rebuttal. The class representatives were in the courtroom and seemed to be as enthralled and curious as I was. We were rewarded when the court granted our motion for certification for all subclasses a few weeks later. This amazing experience heightened my perception

of courts and helped me visualize firsthand the nuts and bolts of the legal process.

Client Contact

One thing that was inherent in my goals for the summer was client contact; the attorneys were delighted to hear this because they already had a project ready for me. Maria and I interviewed farm workers who were either denied work by or worked for Valley Fruit Orchards, Green Acres Farms or Global Horizons, and could be potential witnesses for our case.

This was a great way for me to talk to our clients, sharpen my interviewing skills and retrieve pertinent information from them. This was not as easy as it sounded. Many of our clients were reclusive and it took some probing to get answers. These interviews literally put faces to the work I would be responsible for and gave me the perspective I sought when I accepted this internship.

This experience was exactly what I needed. I feel like I gained a concrete foundation of legal education. The Yakima CLS office was extremely accommodating, supportive and helpful, which allowed for a seamless transition and assimilation from academia to actual practice.

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It was a complete package of developing legal skills in the office, working with clients and seeing the federal wheels turn in a District Court class action hearing. I learned it takes a special kind of person to work for community legal services — one who is dedicated, adamant, patient and, above all, compassionate.

I had the pleasure of working with an incredible group of attorneys and support staff at CLS Yakima and would recommend this experience to any law student regardless of his or her specialization. This internship went above and beyond my expectations and shed light on the injustices that go on right beneath our noses. ■

The Laurel Rubin Farm Worker Justice Project is named in honor of Laurel

Rubin, a talented, idealistic attorney who was serving indigent farm workers in Washington when she died tragically young in 1998. Rubin was an extremely talented lawyer, who was passionately committed to helping migrant workers obtain fairness and respect, and aiding their efforts to enforce their right to fair, dignified, humane and safe working and living conditions.

The Project seeks to get additional advocates into the community immediately through law student summer internships to help ensure indigent farm workers' access to justice by working on cases dealing with immigration, employment discrimination, landlord tenant disputes, workers and unemployment compensation, environmental justice and civil rights. Seattle University law students Erin Glass, Eula Garrison and Michael Khalili have been fellowship recipients in the recent past and this year the honor goes to SU law student Amy Pritchard, who will be working in Yakima this summer.