

Diego Aviles
J.D. Candidate, Class of 2015

2013 Summer at Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County

This past summer I was fortunate enough to be allowed the opportunity to work with Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County. This organization offers free legal representation, advice, and education to the community in an effort to improve the lives of individuals and families battling poverty. NLSLA provides assistance in various areas such as family law, housing, immigration, and worker's rights concerns. My specific background attracted me to their immigration unit and I was able to gain experience that I hope to use myself when I practice.

My work in the immigration unit primarily focused on helping individuals with VAWA and U-VISA applications. The Violence Against Women Act, or VAWA, provides relief to those that are victims of domestic violence while in the United States. I was able to see first hand the traumatic experiences that many undocumented mothers, fathers, and children have to go through. By filing their application, once approved, victims may also file for work authorization, a driver's license, and public benefits.

My experience at Neighborhood Legal Services was only made better because of the amazing mentor that had been assigned to me. Monica Kane, a Santa Clara alumnus, was well versed in immigration law, patient, and willing to teach. Monica has been doing public interest for over 12 years and was able to show me what she does on a daily basis along with the many nuances of immigration law. However, one of the most important things I learned from her was her reason for choosing public interest. She stated that while she had the opportunity to practice in the

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private sector, what brought her back were her clients. I witnessed first hand how a difference is actually being made and was able to see it in people's faces.

One particular client I will always remember. She came to the office seeking help with a VAWA self-petition. In order to submit her application, it is necessary for us to document her declaration on the abuse that she suffered. I was to interpret for the attorney. Something I could not interpret, however, were the tears as she recounted her story. The physical, sexual, and mental abuse were told almost as if it was not a big deal. However, when she began to talk of her children and how they sometimes cry in their room for no apparent reason is something she could not deal with. Her only goal was to find something good come out of the horrible experiences her and her children had to suffer. She was hoping that at least her children would be able to attend school and go on to become successful people.

My summer working for Neighborhood Legal Services was amazing. I come from a low-income community myself and understand the difficulties that people have to face on a daily basis. I am glad that Equal Justice has such a fellowship available and that public interest is an area that is promoted. There is so much more help that is required with organizations such as NLSLA, but it is difficult when funding is limited to pay students. Overall, this was one of the best experiences I have ever had working for an organization and was only able to do so because of the fellowship. I hope that it is something that is carried on for years to come so that other students can help their communities become better places in which to live.

Sincerely,

Diego Aviles
Santa Clara University School of Law, Class of 2015