

"Redefine Public Defense"

As the supporting pillar for the Bronx Defenders' philosophy, this mantra permeated every corner of the bustling law office located in the South Bronx, New York. Even if one never stepped foot in the office, their aim to fundamentally alter the way that public defenders approached the justice system, their cases, and their clients is evident even by looking at their payroll. Employing criminal, civil, and family attorneys, as well as experts in both employment and welfare benefits, parent advocates, and a policy and community development team, the Bronx Defenders shatters the traditional mold of a public defender's office. They have decided that instead of solely focusing on the direct ramifications to their clients' liberty upon entering the justice system, the people who founded and work at the Bronx Defenders take in the whole picture and instead consider "collateral consequences" that are incurred as a result of a criminal or family court case. These collateral consequences involve clients losing public assistance benefits, getting evicted from their homes, losing student loans, or even getting deported as a legal or illegal immigrant. Traditionally, these consequences were either ignored or simply unbeknownst to most public defenders, but these blinders are slowly being removed as the Bronx Defenders continue to fight for a redefinition of what it means to be a public defender.

This summer, with the aid of a Liman Undergraduate Fellowship, I was able to work in the Family Court Practice at the Bronx Defenders. I worked as the Parent Advocate Intern, which meant that I was often working directly with clients in an effort to help them navigate through the often convoluted Family Court system. For reasons more strongly correlated with the

struggles of poverty rather than poor parenting, my clients were usually fighting to get their children back under their care. As the parent advocate intern, I would attend conferences with the clients meeting with representatives from the Administration of Children's Services, various foster care agencies, and court officials. I wrote summaries of these meetings to provide clients' attorneys with updated information on how the case outside of the courtroom was proceeding, and at one point went to Rikers Island to visit a client about his family court case. I have never felt more simultaneously overwhelmed by the apparent injustice that I witnessed as well as motivated to work against it. Indeed, the most memorable moment for me this summer took place not in Family Court or in a conference, but rather on the subway going home after work. I was wearing my Bronx Defenders' shirt, and was recognized as an employee by someone on the subway. She proceeded to tell me how much the Bronx Defenders had changed her life, explaining that not only had our office helped her get her children back, but they had helped her get back into public housing, helped her find a job, and had later helped her son in criminal court. As she was talking to me, two other strangers sitting near us piped in with their own stories about how the Bronx Defenders had helped them return their lives to normalcy, and I was incredibly happy and proud to be working with such an organization.

Currently, I am spending a large amount of time studying for the LSAT that I will take this Fall, and thinking about law school applications. I plan on taking a year off between graduation and law school, and will hopefully work in a position similar to what I did this past summer. I am very grateful to the Liman Foundation for giving me the opportunity to work with the Bronx Defenders this summer, it is an experience that I truly enjoyed and valued.