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Dean Logan's Blog

Summer Corps Standout David Ellison

Posted by David Logan on 10/05/2010 at 12:00 AM

Each year, Equal Justice Works gives Summer Corps Standouts awards to 10 Summer Corps members who are working on innovative projects in communities around the country. RWU Law 3L [Heather O'Connor](#) was selected as one of nine students from a pool of 400 across the country to receive an award last year and the honor went this year to David Ellison. Below is a dispatch on David's summer.



David Ellison at the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, TN,
home of the National Civil Rights Museum

“
There I was, stuck somewhere in Tennessee after I had driven 16 hours over two days. I was on my way to Greenville, Mississippi. The muffler on my Honda Civic had detached and I was stranded. I was a long way from my Providence, Rhode Island home and my car was being towed by AAA but no place was open to fix my muffler because it was Memorial Day. This is when I first received a taste of the South. A man I'd never met opened up his auto body shop for me, fixed my muffler, and only charged me 15 dollars for the weld job. I gave him a twenty and told him to keep the change. He refused to take the tip. His accent was thick and I could not understand much of what he said, but from what I gathered, this was my first taste of southern hospitality.
”

“ I eventually made it to Greenville and began my work for the summer. I am a clerk at the Washington County Public Defender’s office. The office has two attorneys, one investigator and one secretary. We currently represent over 600 open-felony cases. In contrast, the local district attorney’s office has six attorneys, two investigators and five secretaries. Washington County’s population is approximately 55,000 with 67 percent being African-American and 30 percent living below the poverty line. Roughly 95 percent of our clients are men and nearly all are African-American. ”

“ I received the clerkship through the Southern Public Defender Training Center (SPDTC), a nonprofit organization that seeks to inspire, mobilize, and train legal professionals to provide the highest quality defense representation to people unable to afford and attorney in the South. I was recruited by the organization at the New York University Public Interest Law Career Fair. Two of the attorneys that I currently work for received their training through SPDTC. The CEO of the SPDTC convinced me before coming down to the South that my work would be synonymous with those who got on busses and headed to the South to fight for civil rights. The most prevalent civil rights battles to be fought in this country are within the criminal justice system, and this is especially felt in the South where African-Americans living in poverty feel it the worst. ”

“ I try to find a way to relate to our clients. One advantage that I have over the other two attorneys is that I am a man, they are women. Most of our clients are men. I try to relate to our clients by talking to them about facing consequences as men. I present the idea to be patient and rationale with their decisions. Most of them are extremely angry at the preliminary stages of their case and just want it to be dismissed. I try to use my own patience and a composed demeanor to calm them down, assure them in the best way possible and explain their options. Relating to a person accused of a crime who does not have any money, and may have a substance abuse issue or a mental illness cannot be taught in a

textbook or classroom. A positive attitude with open ears is the most successful way to reach them.”

“*Being down here and being a part of something greater than myself has been one of the greatest things I have ever done. I have learned to face many fears: I drove to the South by myself; I have killed Delta-sized cockroaches that were crawling in my bed; and I have become comfortable being in jails. I thought I could never represent a rapist or child molester, but now I see the importance of representing them. No case is perfect and it is not my job to pass judgment-that is a job for the jury. I have learned a lot about the culture, people and the way the law works in the South. This experience has convinced me that I want to be a public defender. There is a great need for passionate public defenders in the South, which is why I may pursue it after I graduate law school.*”