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*CCASSIP Reflection Essay*  
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This summer, I was lucky enough to work for Judge Alvin Hellerstein. This internship was by far the most informative, thrilling, and telling work experience I have had to date. I struggled for a while as to how to structure this essay (there is so much to talk about!), but I ultimately decided on a two-part division that reflected the duality of this internship. As I will describe, I worked on fascinating projects for about half of my time, and went to court for the other half. The juxtaposition of these two facets of my experience led me to learn more about my academic interests, while exposing me to philosophical questions that I never considered before.

First: the work. My general role was as sort of an all-around helper for anybody in the office. I assisted the secretary, courtroom deputies, and law clerks with whatever administrative tasks they had. This included a lot of running between offices within the courthouse, organizing and creating case files, and scanning documents onto the office hard drive. I helped the law clerks gather documents for court. I opened and sorted mail. This was the sort of work I expected to do as the only undergraduate in the office. I now have a deeper understanding of all of the work that needs to happen in order for a court schedule to run smoothly.

As time progressed, though, I began working on more intellectually stimulating projects. My main responsibility was to continue the work of past interns and create a detailed history of the 9/11 litigation before Judge Hellerstein. This group of cases is absolutely fascinating! For the last decade or so, the Judge has presided over thousands of lawsuits related to the September 11th terrorist attacks. To manage this caseload, he arranged all of the lawsuits into various master dockets: one master docket was for wrongful death suits; another was for personal injury suits, etc. For the last few years, interns have been trying to organize and summarize all of the
important documents related to each master docket. I continued the huge project while I worked there, and made a sizeable dent in the work! Another interesting project that I worked on was for Chris, one of the law clerks. He was swamped with work and needed help summarizing various memorandums, affidavits, and other documents for an oral argument that was happening the following Monday.

This ended up being the most intensive and exciting project that I worked on in the office. This was the first time I applied the critical thinking skills that I have cultivated at Columbia to a task at an internship. I've had wonderful experiences before, but they have mostly been administrative. For this task – along with the 9/11 document summarizing project – I read documents and needed to provide a clear and succinct summary of their contents. For the law clerk’s project, I had to carefully analyze each of the six documents and determine how the arguments respond. I identified weaknesses, strengths, and potential objections that the judge could have to each point. It felt like I was completing a puzzle, which made the job extremely fun. This experience showed me that I love exercising my mind in real world scenarios like that, and I am even more excited to become a lawyer than I already was.

The greatest part of this internship, however, was my experience inside of the courtroom. On my first day of work, Judge Hellerstein told me that he wanted me to attend every court proceeding that I could. He told me that I would get the most out of this internship by thinking critically about what I saw both in the work I completed and in court. He was right!

I was able to gain valuable perspective on numerous legal issues by attending his courtroom proceedings. I attended court almost every day with the judge, his law clerks, and whichever legal interns could squeeze a break into their schedules. Judge Hellerstein is a Federal judge, which means that he presides over criminal prosecutions in which the United States
government is a party and a number of different types of civil cases. As a result, I was able to see a wide variety of hearings and trials. I sat in on a lengthy music copyright trial in which a Dominican songwriter and his record label, Mayimba Music, sued Sony Corporation over the Shakira song *Loca*. I saw bits of a civil trial involving highly technical financial issues. Beside those two trials, the hearings I sat in on ranged from oral arguments, to pretrial conferences, to civil status conferences. Before this internship I had only ever been exposed to small portions of criminal law, so it was informative to experience a wide variety of cases. Additionally, it was really nice to know that each of these types of law intrigued me, not just criminal law! I realized that what interests me is not necessarily only the subject matter. Rather, the intellectual questions that underlie each type of law are fascinating, and this again reaffirmed my interest in becoming a lawyer.

While this internship experience prompted much self-reflection, it also made me question several aspects of the legal system. While there are several examples that I could give, the most poignant experience I had in this regard came from watching sentencing hearings. As a brief overview, sentencing hearings occur after a criminal defendant either pleads guilty to a crime or is found guilty after his or her trial. With the exception of two cases, all of the sentencings that I saw were for drug possession and distribution. Each of those cases, except for one, was jarringly similar. All but one of them were from Harlem or the Bronx. All but one were were African American or Latino men. Of those men, some were there for their first offense, and some were there for their second or third arrest. They each described getting involved with drugs because it seemed like the only option.

The one defendant that didn’t match this description was a Caucasian boy about my age. Like the others, he was charged with drug possession and distribution. However, he was clearly
more affluent than the other men. He was arrested after selling drugs on the campus of a university in New York. He showed up to the sentencing in an exquisite suit and told the Court that he had just returned from a six-month stay at a rehabilitation city somewhere in the northeast. His attorney described his admirable recovery, both physically and spiritually. The law clerks later told me that before rehab, he weighed 40 pounds less and looked, well, like an addict. This recovery moved the judge, who was lenient on his sentencing.

Before the judge announces the sentence, he always talks at length about the nature of the crime. For the drug crimes, he talks extensively about addiction. He describes it as destructive and all encompassing, and something that must always be kept in check. He stresses the importance of removing negative influences from your life, so that you can start moving forward. The boy was incredibly lucky to afford an out of state rehabilitation program that turned his life around. In contrast, the defendants who were in court for relapsing a second or third time described their addiction, and how difficult it was to stay out of that life while keeping ties with their friends and families. I don’t wish to diminish the success of the boy’s rehabilitation, but I can’t help but wonder what the lives of the other defendants would be like if they could have afforded to distance themselves from their circumstances at a rehabilitation facility. This internship made me question the extent to which money determines an experience in the legal system in a way that I never thought of before.

This internship not only increased my self-awareness, but instances such as the sentencing hearings led me to evaluate our legal system in new ways. I had an incredible summer with Judge Hellerstein!