What I Learned from Family Court

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At the beginning of this summer, I watched the stage adaption of George Orwell’s 1984 on Broadway. One line from the play stayed with me afterwards: “the past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon”. This idea became strikingly relevant to me in the weeks that followed, as I was an intern to a family court judge in the New York State Court System. I learned that in a legal trial or hearing, important and sometimes life-altering decisions must be made on the basis of people’s testimonies of their memories, and whatever written records exist. This often seems unfair, but it is the best system of recording the past that we have, and the basis of our legal system.

I interned for Judge Robin Kent, and during my internship, I observed many of her hearings. Along with two other interns, I also assisted the judge with legal research for her hearings and trials. In order to do this, I learned how to use the case law research database LexisNexis. Learning how to do legal research taught me that “records” are not as straightforward as I once thought, and that it is possible to find evidence to support both of two opposing legal positions. The first instance of legal research we conducted was to establish whether there was legal precedent for the judge to require a respondent in a trial to sit down in
her courtroom. It was satisfying to see the results of my research immediately applied in a real-world setting.

I also assisted the judge in writing two decisions, one of which was published. I liked doing this type of writing, so I think I would enjoy the work I would do as a lawyer. The judge does not take a position before writing her decisions, but rather arrives at her position through writing. Since the interns were writing the first draft of the judge’s decision, we were able to go through a comparable process to the judge’s in making our own, preliminary decision. I became familiar with the style of writing used in family court decisions, as I read many past decisions before trying to write one for the judge. In writing these decisions, I also learned that “memory” is often subjective: both the memories of people who testify at a trial, and my own memory of the trial itself. When writing decisions, it is difficult to remember every detail of a case. However, having an accurate memory of testimonies, or referring often to the record, is essential to writing a fair decision.

The internship also included the opportunity to go on several fascinating field trips. The first field trip was to the county jail. I had read a lot about but never visited a jail before. I found the experience quite upsetting, as the jail is very stark and the lives of the inmates seemed tedious and difficult. We were able to visit a special unit of the jail where there is an addiction program, and got to hear a talk from two of the inmates and ask them questions. After my visit, I felt
more convinced that our criminal justice system needs to be reformed, and hopeful that a career in law could enable me to be a part of this movement.

Another interesting field trip was a visit to the medical examiner’s office. Here we learned about the process of an autopsy, which individuals qualify for autopsies and how doctors conduct autopsies. We were then given the opportunity to watch an autopsy be performed. We also visited a juvenile detention facility, and Mercy First, an institutional home for foster children. I found it disturbing how similar these two sites were, as many of the children at Mercy First are victims of abuse, or children for whom foster homes cannot be found. It seemed unfair that these children are placed in a disciplinarian environment that is similar to a detention facility. However, the staff at both institutions were very friendly and helpful, and spoke about doing their best to create a pleasant environment for the children.

I was very grateful to have been placed with Judge Kent, as she is both extremely fair and incredibly caring as a judge. I admired the way she gave everyone involved in a matter the chance to speak, so that whatever the outcome, all participants would feel heard. She was stern but never lost her temper, and in my opinion, always made well-considered decisions.

Overall, the internship was incredibly rewarding and I learned a lot: about the court system, family court, what it might be like to be a lawyer, legal research,
decision writing, the criminal justice system, autopsies, foster homes, mental illness, drug addiction, records and memories. Our legal system, like both records and memories, is imperfect, but judges like Judge Kent improve it by being as objective and thorough as possible. I will take everything that I have learned this summer with me as I pursue a career in law.