

Dalhousie Legal Aid Service

By Patricia Masur

Over the last four months I have done my placement with the Dalhousie Legal Aid Service in the North End of Halifax. My main responsibilities here are to be available to assist in any way possible, whether it be organizing cases or writing summaries of documents. However, my supervisors have given me quite a bit of freedom in deciding what I would like to get from my time at the DLAS – in such circumstances I have been able to primarily focus my time on researching the labour rights of workers in the service sector of Nova Scotia. As well, I have been included in the planning process of the December 6th Vigil.

The Dalhousie Legal Aid service has several fulltime lawyers as well as about sixteen senior law students from Weldon which help to take on cases. The center primarily deals with poverty law: human rights complaints, tenancy law, and family law. For myself the experience has been quite eye-opening and has helped me to solidify my desire to attend law school. One experience especially sticks out. Right when I first began my practicum in September I overheard a conversation between one of the law students and her client. I did not overhear anything confidential, nor would I have paid that any mind, what was special about this conversation was the way in which the law student was able to put a completely panicked and anxious client completely at ease. The law student was able to offer this client a strong feeling of security and accountability in her time of need. When people speak of law, lawyers, and court they rarely have much positive to say, however, this instance stood to represent what I consider to be the true motive behind many who practice law – a desire to offer emotional security to their clients. Above everything else, lawyers help to uphold justice and that had never been clearer to me.

In my first few weeks of work I primarily familiarized myself with what the Dalhousie Legal Aid Service does. I read material concerning past initiatives and made myself available to help with other tasks. In this time, I organized case files and wrote a summary on an analysis of accommodation law. I learned a lot about the centre itself, which has committed itself to assisting the marginalized of society and fighting against the status quo. The society truly tries to be a voice for those that may struggle to be heard and watching the lawyers and students pour themselves into this work really represents this commitment.

Following my introductory period, I was given considerable freedom in deciding the aim of a project for the DLAS. Considering my past experience in restaurants and reports of establishments in the Halifax area underpaying international workers and stealing gratuities I chose to focus on researching a way in which I can educate others about what their rights are and what they can do to better their situations. I created a quick pamphlet which answers frequently asked questions, concerning overtime, holiday pay, allotted time off and it also details employers' responsibilities.

As I write, October 24th, my project on labour rights is still in the developing stage. Up to this point I have conducted interviews, furthered my research, and I've had countless debates about the direction I should go with this. To be quite honest I wish I had much more time and resources to give this project the focus that it really needs. I am finding it difficult to narrow my scope because as I continue to research and interview members of the community the concept of labour rights and the many ways in which they are violated continues to grow in complexity. Originally, I had just wanted to create an educational pamphlet to educate workers on their rights and their employers' responsibilities to them. However, it has become clear that it is no longer a question of how employers violate a workers' labour rights, rather these issues are central to the

legislation which allows employers to overwork and underpay workers. From this regard I am more interested in developing an assessment which aims to answer both the how and the why workers' rights are violated.

My initial interviews have brought to light concerning happenings within the low-wage industry, specifically the service sector: intimidation from management against those who speak out; targeting and unfair treatment of those from marginalized communities; and lastly, a pervasive exploitation of vulnerable workers. With continued research and more interviews, I hypothesize that workers lack proper legal protection under the Nova Scotia Labour Standards Code and thus this puts a burden on the employer to utilize labour friendly policies without being bound by law. As such, for my primary project with the DLAS I will compile this information into an easy to read pamphlet which addresses how and why rights are violated and what one's options are to rectify this, or perhaps why their options are limited in some instances. This project will include research, interviews, and an analysis of current labour laws with comparisons of some provisions from Ontario and British Columbia.

I would like to continue working on the labour rights project in much greater detail, however, it is quite time consuming and would amount to a much larger report than I currently have the capacity for. As such, with my time wrapping up at the DLAS my aim is to create a brief pamphlet which articulates one's rights in terms of hourly wage, holiday pay and time off, vacation allowances, and a quick description of common rights' violations.

My other primary focus has been on helping to organize the December 6th vigil in memory of the 14 Montreal women murdered in 1989. I have drafted donation request letters as well as promoted our jar program for the Purple Ribbon Campaign. I have gone to local businesses to inform them of the Purple Ribbon Campaign in hopes that they will accept one of

our donation jars. In doing this I analyzed the previous three years of records to ascertain which businesses collected the most donations and which businesses may have the most opportunity. This allowed me to make inferences about what type of business would do well, which location, and how to better improve our results.

The preparation for the vigil has also included organizing venue, pricing the cost of food and hot drinks and lining up potential speakers. The time commitment has been a bit more than originally anticipated but my thought is that you get what you put in, so in this way some students may take on less at the DLAS but the opportunity to gain more experience and truly dedicate yourself exists. In addition to the vigil I have tried to make myself as available as possible for my colleagues there. In this capacity, I have helped to organize case files, written summaries, and have completed minor research tasks.

In between working on my labour rights project, helping to organize the vigil, and odd tasks that I take on I have also been given great opportunities. For example, upon learning about my research interest in Guatemala Susanne Litke, one of the lawyers at the DLAS, allowed me to accompany her to a wonderful performance by Rebecca Lane. Rebecca Lane is well known poet, rapper, activist, and feminist from Guatemala who speaks about her experiences growing up in the aftermath of the genocide and civil war. Moreover, she touches on issues of femicide and female targeted violence. While this has little to do with the work I have been focusing on at the DLAS it is an experience I am incredibly grateful for. Moreover, it helped to remind me, in quite a difficult time, why I am at university and why I love what I am studying.

Donna Franey, the director of Dalhousie Legal Aid, was an amazing point of contact throughout my time there. Donna answered all of my, several hundred emails, efficiently and despite being incredibly busy she always answered all of my questions. Donna offered her ear

and helped me to develop my research interests and directed me to further resources. However, it is worth mentioning that the society is incredibly busy and they are also dealing with issues that are usually quite time sensitive, as such, if you are not self-driven the position could be difficult to maneuver in terms of identifying areas to help and making connections with others there. I was able to take advantage of such a wonderful opportunity but without maintaining standards of your time it could be easy to give far too much time to the placement, while nothing is wrong with this it can pose an issue if you allow it to take priority over your other work.

Unfortunately for myself, I have had to reduce my availability at the Legal Aid due to personal circumstances. I would have liked to continue my time in depth and be able to have a much more increased availability. I wanted to play a larger part in planning the December 6th Vigil and really thought I could put my all into it. However, life happens and the Society has been incredibly understanding in allowing me to work from home and reduce my hours overall. If another student were to take on this practicum I would recommend to them to find their focus early on and really take the initiative to make it their own. In doing so, I believe one can have a fulfilling experience. I still have been able to play a role in planning the vigil in helping to find a venue, handing out jars, and putting up posters.

There truly are numerous possibilities of career avenues with a law degree and you are far from stuck to practicing in Canadian courts. This has been made apparent to me through the several ways in which the lawyers at the DLAS help to give back to the community through different initiatives. For example, continuing from the Rebecca Lane performance I learned that Ms. Litke after obtaining her law degree worked closely with non-governmental organizations in Guatemala in the aftermath of the genocide and peace agreements. Moreover, the Legal Aid Society actively works with several organizations to help alleviate poverty among marginalized

members of society. In my opinion, this has been the most defining factor in helping me to solidify my desire to work in a legal field. This placement truly has had an amazing impact on my academic career and, if possible, I would take the opportunity to continue working with such an organization. I also think this placement, among others, is important for senior undergraduate students to learn the value of volunteering in order to enhance, not only their resume, but their overall academic experience as a whole.