

Asaf Rashid Law

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For the 2022 Winter semester at Dalhousie University, I enrolled in the POLI/GWST 4390 course, which offers a practicum placement for students looking to get hands-on experience in their desired field. I am currently a fourth-year student completing my bachelor of arts with a major and honours in Law, Justice, and Society and a minor in Political Science. I spent the last three months working at Asaf Rashid Law for my placement. This placement was my top pick because I eventually want to go to law school, so working one-on-one with a lawyer in Halifax provided a great opportunity and perspective on the realities of the job.

Asaf Rashid is a Halifax-based lawyer that focuses mainly on immigration law; labour and employment law; and criminal defence law. He is dedicated to helping clients confront their legal battles and continues to fight alongside low-income and working people for housing rights, better working conditions, and to stay in Canada and against discrimination. Asaf values a client-centred approach and emphasizes the importance of empowering his clients to ensure they understand the legal challenges they are facing and then follow up with what he can do to help. Asaf also believes that knowledge is power, so he puts on various workshops and presentations for classrooms and communities, so they too know their legal rights under potentially ambiguous situations.

As a lawyer, your job and projects are ever-changing, so I was never left without work to do. Asaf was my primary and only supervisor, so we got to work one-on-one throughout the entire semester. He is based in an office located downtown Halifax, but due to COVID-19, the whole placement was conducted through online services and work modems. We decided to have weekly meetings over zoom to discuss what specific tasks I would do that week. To supervise

and monitor my work, we used a shared Google Folder that could be uploaded to regularly. We also very frequently updated each other and kept in contact through emails. He was always very good at responding quickly.

A critical part of the relationship between lawyers and their clients is confidentiality. One of the first things Asaf and I did together was sign a confidentiality agreement. The work and information I have access to must not leave the space of confidentiality, which is why it was always essential to have access to a quiet and closed-off room, separate from the people you live with. During the initial meeting, Asaf and I talked about my specific areas of interest in law and what kind of classes I took to determine where I would best fit in his practice.

After the initial meeting, Asaf decided to have me help on a criminal defence case that he was currently working on. I will outline the case as it shaped the work I had to do for the remaining of the semester. I can convey this information because it is public information and has been reported in various news and media outlets. On August 18th, 2021, hundreds of people went downtown Halifax to call attention to police-led evictions of unhoused people living in parks and stand in solidarity for the right to housing. Twenty-four demonstrators and community members were arrested outside of the old library, while the police actively removed the temporary homeless shelters. In an attempt to control the crowds and stop them from blocking the removal of the shelters, the police started to use excessive levels of force and pepper spray, resulting in many being left injured or hurt. The 24 demonstrators were charged with various offences, including obstruction, assaulting police and resisting arrest. Asaf is the defence lawyer representing most of the arrestees for the same event, already making this case unique. Despite there being many arrestees, there were also a lot of witnesses. The large number of people present on August 18th allowed the event to be highly recorded by cell phones and social media.

Court dates for those moving forward with the charges are currently in the works of being set. Hence, a lot of work needed to be done to prepare for this case, work that I was able to help out with.

Over the first month, my task was to contact all of those who showed interest in being a witness for the case and ask them if they were willing to have an interview with me. This included following up with and corresponding to roughly thirty people daily and organizing time slots for the interviews. Asaf drafted the interview template, but I was the one to conduct the interviews with the witnesses. To help familiarize me with the case before speaking with anyone, I had access to a significant number of recordings and photos taken during the demonstration. Going through these files helped me make a mental note of what occurred and the reality of the case at hand. These interviews took place over the phone or through Zoom, and they ranged in time from 10 minutes to 40 minutes each. The interview length depended on the witness's account of what took place on August 18th. During these interviews, it was also my job to record the conversation, which I disclosed to the witnesses. After the interviews were concluded, I uploaded each recording to the shared Google folder for Asaf to have a record of. These recordings are an essential part of helping build the case because they provided scope for defending those who were wrongfully arrested. Throughout this first month, I continued to facilitate conversations and information between the witnesses and Asaf.

I was also given articles within the first week of my placement that covered the various legal principles, past court rulings, and international law protocols for homeless encampments in Canada. My job was to read up on and become educated on this material that intersects with the defence case. As recognized by the United Nations, housing is a component of the right to an adequate standard of living. In August, those evicted from the parks were not engaged in a

meaningful discussion regarding their eviction and were not provided with solutions to their homelessness, such as adequate housing replacements or necessary support systems. So this case has become representative of a potential human rights issue. Police and city officials used extreme tactics to remove the homes from the park. They also used pepper spray and riot gear to prevent human rights defenders from protesting the eviction and destruction of the various encampments. For these reasons, Asaf also gave me some of his material to become educated on protest laws, protestors' rights, the risks of protesting, and what to prepare for/expect upon being arrested. Throughout the entire placement, Asaf really valued educating me every step of the way, so it was not only work that had to be done. There always remained an educational component.

During this first project, I also sat in on a trial meeting that Asaf held with a few of his clients for the case. This meeting aimed to present to the arrestees the potential trial procedures if the crown decides to move forward with the various charges received on August 18th. I was introduced to the arrestees by Asaf, and he disclosed what my role was in helping with the case. Asaf gave a presentation on case management and the possibility of a trial. He did an excellent job communicating with his clients about their options and what those various legal proceedings would look like. As previously stated, this is a unique case where one lawyer represents many clients on the same day of arrest. So there are logistics that have to be discussed with the crown and judge as to whether those going forward with a trial will all be represented at once or individually. Asaf goes over the pros and cons of going to trial and discusses some of the potential arguments he plans to raise, particularly concerning charter and constitutional rights breaches. At the end of his presentation, he held an open discussion with the arrestees to put forward any questions about the justice proceedings and their options.

Once the interviews were complete, my next task was to transcribe them. More specifically, pull out the key details from the answers given to the interview questions. I used Google sheets to create a spreadsheet to input all the information. This task took up much more time than I had initially anticipated, and it took roughly three to four weeks to complete. It required that I be keen on organizational skills and pay particular attention to details, so Asaf could effectively build his defence case from the information I manually put in the spreadsheet. This part of the project was really about collecting and organizing the information provided by the witnesses, so it can then be determined who will be a witness for which arrestee. More witness interviews continued to roll in throughout the process, making it an extensive project throughout the semester. Upon completion, it was quite satisfying to let Asaf know that I had finalized the spreadsheet. He can now access all of the information from the witness interviews in one document, rather than going back and listening to the recordings.

In the remaining weeks of my placement, I am helping organize the logistics of an event for the community. Asaf and I discussed that I would continue helping out with the event because I want to be able to see it through. Although the placement is complete as I write this report, I have voluntarily decided to keep working with Asaf throughout April. This was a decision wholly made on my behalf, and the option to be done with the placement as initially marked by the syllabus remained a free choice.

We are aiming to host the non-profit event with a panellist of speakers to bring widespread attention back to the case, as it is heavily involved with the public interest. This event will address several intersecting issues surrounding the encampment evictions on August 18, ensuing arrests, and the aftermath. The panellists we are recruiting come from various non-governmental and community organizations to be able to speak specifically about defunding

the police and supporting the community, the right to housing and the forced evictions into homelessness, the housing crisis in Halifax, and the criminalization of those in solidarity with the houseless and the protection of their fundamental rights. I am currently reaching out to different venues to secure a spot and date for us to host the event. It has been a bit hard to find a venue that accommodates precisely what we are looking for at the right price, but there are hopes that we will secure a time and place very soon. The working title for the event that we brainstormed together is “Defund the Police, House our Neighbours.” Once all of the details have become finalized in the upcoming weeks, we will start reaching out on various social media platforms to help spread awareness of the event in hopes that upwards of 200 people will attend. I look forward to seeing the event we are in the midst of organizing play out because it signifies the importance of the work that Asaf and I have been doing this past semester. By bringing the community together to stand in solidarity with those arrested and evicted, we are connecting the broader issues of the August 18th case to structural injustices that need to be addressed in Halifax.

Going into this placement, I hoped I would see the inside of the courtroom, but sadly that did not happen due to COVID-19 restrictions. So there are hopes that future students will be able to do so. One of the best parts about having my placement at Asaf Rashid Law was the flexibility it gave me to work around my school schedule. I was able to work a few hours a couple of days a week, or I could work the entire seven hours in one day. Some weeks were heavier in tasks than others, but the work averaged out to be manageable throughout the semester. As the first student working with Asaf through the placement program, I would recommend it to future students looking to get hands-on experience in the legal field. As the student, you essentially take on the role of a lawyer's assistant and help complete tasks for one of the cases they are currently

working on. This placement made me realize just how busy a lawyer's life can be, especially when they take a much more client-centred approach, so Asaf highly appreciated any help I could bring to the table. I never felt like I was not helping out in some way. It may not be the traditional legal office setting the student will experience, but you still get to be involved with all the lives that a legal case will touch. If you have strong interpersonal and organizational skills with an interest in the legal field, I would highly recommend this placement for future students.