Dalhousie Legal Aid Service

By Mee-Ya Chambers

Over the course of this semester, I have been working at my placement which is Dalhousie Legal Aid Service (DLAS) in the North End of Halifax under the supervision of Megan Longley. The mandate of Dalhousie Legal Aid is to provide free legal help to underserved members of our community who would not be able to obtain legal help otherwise. The clinic is made up of practicing lawyers, social workers, legal workers as well as a handful of law students from the Dalhousie’s law school who work at the clinic for course credit. As a student who is interested in a career in law, I was excited for the opportunity to observe and learn about how the law is practiced in the real life juxtaposed to what I had learned in the classroom setting.

Foremost, this experience has been integral in deepening my understanding of the day to day lives and responsibilities of practicing lawyers. At the start of the semester, my supervisor granted me a lot of freedom in choosing what I wanted to be involved in over my time at Dalhousie Legal Aid. I voiced an interest in human right law but stated that I was looking to get a sense of the day-to-day aspects of being a lawyer and was thus interested in anything that had planned for me.

The bulk of my learning I can attribute from simply just observing everyone in the clinic and seeing how they talked to each other and about their cases. I had never been in an environment like this before, so I enjoyed the opportunity to listen and observe what everyone had to say. I immediately was interested in listening to how the law students talked amongst each other about their workload at school as well as their caseload in the clinic since each law student is given a couple case files to oversee each semester. I liked listening to them talk about what they were working on regarding their cases and watching them learn how to deal with their cases as well as their clients.

In the beginning of my placement, I was immediately fascinated by the seminars I was permitted to attend. The law students at the clinic are mandated to attend skills seminars which are like lectures that cover different aspects of the legal system. Some I particularly enjoyed were the seminars on cross-examinations, the Youth Criminal Justice Act, residential tenancies, and family law. My placement supervisor told me that I was welcome to attend any of the seminars that piqued my interest as she knew I had an interest in law and becoming a lawyer. I ended up going to most of them because I found it useful to listen to the lawyers at the clinic lecture about different legal processes and other social issues. I also enjoyed observing the dynamic of the law students who would ask questions and sometimes debate each other at these skills seminars.

I was fortunate in the sense that I was given a significant amount of freedom in deciding what I wanted out of this placement. Upon our first meeting, my supervisor asked me what I would be interested in doing and what areas of the law fascinated me. I was keen to let her know that human rights law was my primary interest. Specially, I had mentioned an interest in low-income housing and residential issues as I knew there would be a lot of those types of cases due to the ongoing gentrification in the North End of Halifax. One of the first tasks I worked on was completing research on a cost-benefit analysis of low-income housing that would be used for a project that a staff member at the clinic was working on. This was extremely interesting to me as I have always had a specific interest in public policy as it pertains to social programs like accessible housing. It was both informative and interesting to look at the body of research around affordable housing programs and how investing in these preventative programs saved the government and taxpayers a significant amount of money. The research I was doing was being used to support a case study the Dalhousie Legal Aid which talking about a previous client who was facing eviction but was able to avoid it due to the help of Dalhousie Legal Aid. The clinic was planning on using this case study to gain funding on the basis that investing money in the clinic was able to prevent people from eviction which saves more money than spending additional money on crisis management resources in the community such as homeless shelters, hospitals, or food banks. The focus of my research was to try and find different metrics that can quantify how much money the government saves by investing in low-income housing initiatives. Instead of spending money on emergency resources like hospital visits, food banks and shelters – the government would save more money by giving resources to preventive measures such as legal aid and other initiatives that keep people from being homeless. Reading the case file about someone who almost faced homeless as well as learning about the lived experience of those being affected by this pervasive issue was pivotal in me cementing my interest in this type of law and further deepening my budding interest in public policy. My experience at Dalhousie Legal Aid not only taught me about those who practice law, but those who are most affected by it. Seeing and hearing the stories of those in serious need of legal help increased my interest in law and made me aware of just how important this area of law is to underserved communities.

Some other smaller projects I was tasked with was looking over the lecture material that was used in the skills seminars and checking them for any outdated language or problematic examples. The lawyers at the clinic have been using these materials for years so I was told to make sure that it was relevant and politically correct. Additionally, I helped edit an old case file that was being used for a mock trial simulation that the law students were partaking in. This old case file had writing errors and conflicting dates, so I had to go in and make sure all the correct information was listed as well as flag information that was contradicting or incorrect.

Something that was promised to me early on in my placement was the opportunity to accompany some of the lawyers and law students to court so I could observe how the court process works. The first time I accompanied some the of the clinic lawyers and students was for arraignment court. Before this, I had never stepped foot in a courthouse. To see the law being practiced in real life was truly a unique experience. I sat back in awe as I watched the dynamic between the lawyers, the law students, and the judges. The whole experience made me consider a career in trial law which is something I had never really considered before this experience. After we were done in court, my supervisors and some of the law students took me for coffee so that we could debrief the experience as well as answer any questions that I had. This is just one of many examples of how my supervisor Megan and the law students went above and beyond to ensure my experience at Dalhousie Legal Aid was informative as possible. This is something that is truly unique about this placement; at its core, it is meant to be a learning opportunity. Since the bulk of the clinic revolves around teaching the law students how to be lawyers working on real cases, there is an emphasis put on learning.

I had another opportunity to attend court where I was invited to see a restorative justice conference for a youth criminal justice case. It was extremely eye-opening to see the many moving parts of the law come together to from a rehabilitation plan for the young child who was facing charges. As psychology is my major, it was interesting for me to see how law and psychology interact. In this case, the judge, lawyers, and various psychologists and social workers came together to formulate a plan for a child who was displaying behavioural issues. This restorative justice conference also made it apparent to me how there is an overarching issue regarding the scarcity of mental health resources in Nova Scotia.

Although this placement was a great learning experience and amazing in many ways, something I would like to note about this placement is about its lack of structure. At the beginning of the placement, I found that my supervisor would not have pre-planned things for me to do. I was surprised as I had assumed there would be a list of tasks for me to complete or projects to work on that would be scheduled for me to do. I often found myself having to approach my supervisor and inquire about findings tasks to do. In hindsight, I understand that due to the busy nature of the clinic, there is an onus on the placement student to take a certain degree of initiative in sourcing projects or tasks to work on. I would suggest that the student who is interested in a placement at Dalhousie Legal Aid should be okay with a lack of structure. I was often given tasks as they came up instead of having pre-planned things to work on. Additionally, the student who considers this placement should feel okay with approaching Megan (the placement supervisor) or other employees at the clinic to ask about projects that they can help work on. Initially, there was a learning curve in the sense that I would sit around and wait for my supervisor to approach me with a task and would find that she would not give me anything to do. Eventually, I got comfortable approaching her and asking for things to do instead of waiting for her to plan things for me.

In conclusion, I can say that this past semester at Dalhousie Legal Aid was truly informative in directing my interest in law and showing me the realities of being a practicing lawyer. There are very few opportunities that are as candid as the legal aid clinic that can give undergraduate students such an intimate experience with the law. I think this placement is valuable for students who are interested in having a better understanding of what working in the legal field is like and especially gaining a perspective of what law school is like. This placement is unique in the sense of being involved with the lawyers who work at the clinic as well as the senior law students who give such valuable insight into what law school is like. This duality in learning has made this experience unique and informative in preparing me for entering law school as well as determining what a career in law could look like.