

*Reflections by Rachel Orbach, NYWBAF Fellow at Sanctuary For Families*

During the fall semester of my second year at Fordham University School of Law, I served as a New York Women's Bar Association Foundation fellow at Sanctuary for Families ("Sanctuary"). Sanctuary is New York's leading advocate and service provider for survivors of domestic violence, sex trafficking and related forms of gender violence.

I was given significant responsibility from the beginning, which made my experience at Sanctuary rewarding. On my first day, I went to the Bronx Family Courthouse, where I helped represent a victim after her ex-husband filed a petition for a Downward Modification of Child Support. I also drafted a temporary protection order for a victim of abuse and talked the client through the process before the case was presented to the judge.

I also participated in the intake process by interviewing clients. Through extensive client interaction, I learned the ins and outs of a domestic violence case. I also researched topics such as the Effectiveness of Batterer Intervention Programs and whether statements made by certain witnesses would be subject to the hearsay exception rule.

Although I primarily worked in the domestic violence unit, Sanctuary provides a wide variety of services for their clients. I was fortunate to gain exposure to some of these programs, including the Adopt a Family and Economic Empowerment Programs. Specifically, I attended one of Sanctuary's Legal Advisory Council's ("LAC") monthly meetings, during which a group of prominent legal administrators and lawyers meet to develop special programs and find ways to promote Sanctuary's legal center. I was particularly struck by the way in which Sanctuary and the LAC assist victims reintegrate into society by providing computer training, résumé support and efforts to pair these clients with career opportunities through networking.

I was privileged to work directly with Dorchen Leidholdt, Sanctuary's Legal Center Director and a renowned activist who has dedicated herself to the movement against violence against women for the past forty years. In addition to her managerial role, she is also responsible for her own clients. She once told me that she couldn't envision it any other way, and anyone who knows Ms. Leidholdt can tell you how tirelessly she works for her clients, but most of all, how much she cares.

My experience at Sanctuary elucidated the impact of the law in our personal lives. It can determine whether a child will be given adequate protection from an abusive parent and whether full custody will be taken away from a parent. It can put a victim in a precarious situation, causing absences or firing from work and financial harm, and could detrimentally impact one's mental health and well-being. Victims may even be put on the defensive, forced to prove they are sufficiently "fit" to be parents for their children. I also learned that domestic violence is a universal problem from which both men and women suffer.

I am honored to be a recipient of a NYWBAF Fellowship and grateful for the time I spent at Sanctuary and the opportunity to be involved in their efforts to promote gender equality, among other things. I am confident that the valuable skills I have learned will serve me well and impact my decisions in my legal career.

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