

*Reflections by Kathleen Wahl, New York Women's Bar Association Foundation Fellow at Safe Horizon*

Last summer, I served as the New York Women's Bar Association Foundation Fellow with Safe Horizon's Domestic Violence Law Project. Safe Horizon's mission is to provide support, prevent violence, and promote justice for victims of domestic crime and abuse, their families and communities. The Safe Horizon Domestic Violence Law Project provides legal assistance in custody, visitation, divorce, child support, and family offense proceedings in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Bronx, and Staten Island family courts. I worked before law school in a client-centered organization, and missed that type of work. My goal at Safe Horizons was to resume my focus on individual clients, specifically to learn how to engage meaningfully and empathetically with women and children who had survived trauma and were navigating the New York City Family Court system.

Through my fellowship, I represented clients on the record in the Family Courts of all five New York City boroughs. I regularly conducted client interviews, participated in safety planning, and explained court processes. I provided legal information and conducted intake interviews through Safe Horizon's legal assistance help line. I also had the opportunity to prepare uncontested divorce documents, research and draft petitions, motions, memoranda of law, direct and cross examinations, closing statements and settlements, and engage in trial preparation including preparing witnesses for testimony and in custody, child support, divorce, and family offense proceedings. I learned about the intersection between family and immigration law and the legal processes for divorce, child support, custody, and family offense cases. I also had many opportunities to help strategize for particular cases and to observe appearances and trials in family courts. In all of these activities, the training and supervision that staff attorneys provided me were invaluable.

While advocating for clients at Safe Horizon, I learned about the unique burden that a Family Court process places on parents and families. Clients told me about feeling re-traumatized when having to speak about their personal and familial relationships in court and in

having Family Court judges and the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) case workers analyze and opine on the most intimate parts of their lives. It was a privilege to help domestic violence survivors navigate the deeply challenging legal issues in their lives and achieve some degree of empowerment.

I would like to thank the NYWBA Foundation for the opportunity to work with the Safe Horizon Domestic Violence Law Project. What I learned about the special challenges that families face in Family Court proceedings has inspired me to delve deeper into family law by defending parents through The Bronx Defenders Family Defense Practice for my upcoming summer internship.

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