

*Reflections by Katarina Schweitz, New York Women's Bar Association Fellow at Sanctuary for Families*

On the first day of my fellowship from the New York Women's Bar Association Foundation, Sanctuary for Families introduced me to all they have to offer women experiencing domestic abuse. As I sat in the legal library, with a fresh notebook and new pen, I was anxious to meet with my first client for an intake screening. My supervising attorney sat with me.. She arrived with her baby, giving us a forthright smile to thank us for meeting with her before we even had the chance to say our names.

Considering her quiet tone combined with energy, many would be quick to dismiss the true depth of the abuse she endured. The client answered every question about her life and what brought her to Sanctuary with vigorous candor: she fled her home country in fear of the emotional abuse and physical attacks she suffered because she had given birth to her baby daughter out of wedlock. She had accepted her village's expulsion of her and now hoped for a new life in New York for herself and her baby. Although each of her parents, five siblings, and the father of her child ostracized her, the client was not a victim, but recognized that she needed help obtaining legal remedies and collecting basic survival resources.

I began my training by getting up to date on all the recent relevant literature regarding best practices for advocating on behalf of individuals who have experienced domestic violence. I was intrigued by the opportunity to participate in and contribute to an organization that helps begin to reestablish a sense of self-worth and self-reliance. I observed my supervising attorneys and their team of coworkers interview clients and gather information sufficient to establish a case

for a family offense. After shadowing a few client intakes, I began to call clients who used Sanctuary's help hotline to collect information on the story of their relationships and the history of the abuse, as well as ascertaining what they sought concerning legal protection and safety planning.

If clients had not already obtained some order of protection based on a previous incident of domestic abuse, the client generally requested a temporary order that compelled her abusive partner to refrain from going near her house, school or place of work and from committing a crime against her. When the client sought to go to trial in Family Court to obtain a final order of protection, I helped prepare the client for direct and cross-examinations by forming a list of onerous questions she might have to answer. This question-and-answer practice session established a conversational rapport between the client and her legal advocate, which enabled her to tell her story more fully and demand her rights more clearly when the time came for her to face the judge, jury, and even her abuser.

Although most of my fellowship at Sanctuary concentrated on gathering information during intake, petitioning for Family Court orders of protections and preparing clients for trial, I also had the opportunity to engage in the basic work needed to meet the procedural requirements of a civil legal action. I researched case law to support claims in marital debt disputes, feuds over custody and maintenance payments, and admissibility standards for picture evidence from a cellphone. I ordered transcripts from our clients' previous hearings in New York City Family Courts and filed trial exhibit and witness lists with the courts' clerks. I volunteered with Sanctuary's Courtroom Advocacy Project, which assists women to petition for and obtain Family Court orders of protection on the very same day they ask for such legal recourse.

Offering various services and programs – from legal services in immigration and human trafficking, crisis shelters, childcare support and clinical counseling to community outreach and social media events – Sanctuary for Families provides the legal, physical and emotional resources that help women at their most vulnerable combat the burdens of their situations. I've had the wonderful privilege of working at Sanctuary for Families, learning from and being inspired by the attorneys, their staff and our clients. I am honored to be a fellow with the New York Women's Bar Association Foundation at Sanctuary for Families. I will take the knowledge, skills and hopes I gained from this experience and continue to fight for gender equality and every human's right to be safe, healthy and free from domestic violence.

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