

WHAT I LEARNED AT Rappahannock Legal Services (RLS) – REFLECTIONS OF AN RLS VOLUNTEER

RLS (editor's note: now Legal Aid WorksSM) has been an amazing place to work and I can't think of a better place to gain experience in the legal field while helping an organization that does so much for the community.

If I had to choose the single most important thing that I learned at RLS, I think it would be the absolutely enormous need that exists for civil legal representation for those who can't afford it. Even given the relatively limited scope of cases that RLS handles, the sheer quantity of cases that we take (and quantity of applicants we are unable to accept) is just staggering. After realizing this, though, I think a second shock for me was when I began to get a sense of just how important getting legal assistance is for almost every one of the people that apply. This largely came from looking through cases and realizing that, if it wasn't for RLS, this child would probably still be with her abusive father, or that mother of three probably wouldn't be receiving child support. It really does give you a sense of the enormous justice gap that exists, and how essential organizations like RLS are.

In a completely different sense, I also learned some of the basic legal information that I think provides a really good foundation for someone interested in the legal field. Just having a sense of how you get from the first client meeting to the final order, and being able to open up a file and understand why a certain motion was filed, are things that make the legal field seem slightly less baffling. Also, just being in the same office as practicing attorneys and having an idea of how their day is spent is something that I think was incredibly important for me as someone hoping to eventually be in a similar position.

One of the most basic things that I learned, though, was simply getting used to working in an office setting. Having never worked in an office before, I had to learn for the first time everything from how to communicate with co-workers, to how to transfer calls and make copies. As simple as it may seem, I think one really nice thing about RLS was that I got the chance to learn these basic skills in a place where it was always really easy to ask someone for help.

I honestly have learned a great deal in so many different ways, and I'm really glad to have had the opportunity to volunteer at a place that truly does a lot of good.

Best of luck with everything!

- Ryan McDonald

2012 Graduating Senior at University of Mary Washington, Fredericksburg, VA