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International Rescue Committee Immigration Intern  
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This past summer I had the opportunity to intern at the International Rescue Committee, a refugee resettlement agency, in its Northern California Immigration Office. It was one of the most challenging, rigorous, and rewarding experiences of my life. As an Immigration Intern, I was tasked specifically with working on a new joint immigration-resettlement program, recently put in place by the U.S. government. The program is called Central American Minors – Affidavit of Relationship (CAM-AOR) and provides certain qualified children living in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras a safer alternative to reach the U.S. than the harrowing journey otherwise taken. If these children have at least one parent living in the U.S. with a qualifying legal status, that parent is able to apply with a designated resettlement agency to bring his or her children to the U.S. as refugees.

When I arrived at the beginning of the summer, only a handful of applications were open. I worked full-time on outreach, application appointments, and all follow-up with parents living in the Northern California area, and by the end of the summer our office had over 83 open applications to bring over 125 children. Because of the long application processing time, I did not see any children reach the U.S during my 11-week internship. At the end of my time there, many of the families I worked with at the beginning of the summer were in the final interview stage of the process, and I am hopeful many will be able to reunite with their children in the coming months.

I had many thought provoking, challenging moments during my internship, but one of the most unforgettable happened over the phone with a client from Guatemala.

She had two sons, whom she had not seen in almost 15 years, living in Guatemala without a guardian. In what should have been a routine phone call for case upkeep, this mother broke down in tears while on the phone with me, saying she could barely speak about her sons. She explained to me that just a few days earlier gang members in Guatemala had kidnapped the sons' father, who was living in a neighboring village, because he refused to give up his sons' address. The gang members had been desperately trying to find these boys in an effort to recruit them. I could not believe what I was hearing. I had understood before what I was working toward—I knew that I was trying to reunite families, keep children out of danger, and provide a legal way for kids to reach safety. But I had no idea what exactly these children were up against until moments like what I have just described. After that moment in particular I began to better understand my responsibility to help these children, and consequently their families, who are living in constant fear of life-threatening danger. I decided that I did not want to stop with this type of work at the end of my summer, but that I want to devote my life to a type of public service that helps those most in need in similar situations.

Without the Wellman Hill Grant, this internship would have never been possible. The opportunity of moving to Northern California for an unpaid internship would have never been mine to take had it not been for the generous funding from Liz Hill. I consider myself incredibly lucky to have received the chance to work at the organization that I did, but the fact that I was able to seize this chance is due to the Wellman Hill Scholarship. I gained valuable and worthwhile experience for my future career in public service, and I left the internship feeling that I had made a real difference.