

When I found out that my personal office for the summer was President Grover Cleveland's (when he was Mayor of Buffalo) and that the courtroom I would be sitting in every day heard the trial of President William McKinley's assassinator, I knew I was in for a historic summer. Yet my actual experience as an intern with Judge Barbara Howe of the New York State's Surrogate's Court for Erie County transcended even these lofty expectations. I could not have imagined how momentous my summer would be.

The New York State's Surrogate's Court handles matters regarding the estates and affairs of the deceased. This includes administering probate (the process of deciding the legal validity of a decedent's will), overseeing cases when a person dies without a will, and inventorying, distributing, and monitoring the assets of an estate. Additionally, the Surrogate's Court handles the adoption and guardianship of minors. The Court has over 25 employees, including seven staff attorneys who help manage the Court's voluminous caseload, which is greater than any other county court in the entire state of New York.

I spent a majority of my time at the courthouse assisting the staff attorneys and chief clerk with reviewing probate and administration petitions. Mainly, I would review the package of legal documents submitted to the court by the fiduciaries of an estate, including the decedent's death certificate, will, citations, and petitions for probate, and determine whether all the documents were legally sufficient. If valid, I recommended the will to probate. More often than not, however, I determined what was wrong with the petition and what the petitioners needed to resubmit to the court. I also reviewed the inventory of assets of estates that the court oversaw, as

well as legal documents from an outside agency that assists fiduciaries in collecting unclaimed assets of an estate.

These tasks required me to extensively learn trust and estate law. My first day at the court, one of the staff attorneys gave me two encyclopedia sized textbooks of the New York State trust and estates statutes and procedures and told me to read up!

The fact that I was able to do “real attorney work,” as the judge put it, both surprised and elated me. Being able to “practice” law under the guidance of the judge and seasoned attorneys was a true honor and learning experience. On numerous occasions the judge and attorneys even expressed their gratitude for the work I performed. Not only was I gaining exposure to the law, but more importantly, I was helping the court to carry out its service to the community.

Yet the most memorable moments from my internship came from simply observing Judge Howe both in and out of the courtroom. Howe, who has a PhD in sociology from Cornell, is truly one of a kind. Her compassion for others and dedication to upholding the sanctity of the law is remarkable. The judge’s insistence that everything in her court is done with orthodoxy, that no short cuts are ever taken, ensures that every person who appears before her is given a fair shot.

My time spent with Judge Howe not only bolstered my desire to go to law school, but also reassured me of my commitment to public service, all of which was made possible by Judge Hill’s generous gift.