A Life-Changing Journey to Africa

By Jessica George

The courtroom is tense. The gallery above me is overflowing with concerned residents of the town where the six-month-old baby girl was murdered in her crib. Everyone is leaning anxiously over the railing, straining to hear the judge. Just a few feet from me stand the five accused: a young white woman named Dina Rodriguez, and four young black men. Beside me sits the mother of the murdered baby and her boyfriend, in matching pin-striped suits. I try to read their faces for emotion, but after sixteen months of trial, those faces have become stone.

I am lucky to attend today’s proceedings because Rodriguez’s lawyer is giving his closing argument. He argues all day, with an hour break for lunch. Photographers line up outside for shots of the victim’s family. The media is all over this case; it’s not every day that a white woman is accused of paying young black men to murder the child her ex-boyfriend had with another woman. This case cuts across the most controversial issues in South Africa today: race, money, gender, and power. A few weeks later, the judge takes two days to read his two-hundred-page opinion: the five are guilty.

When I decided to spend a semester working at a public interest law firm in Cape Town, South Africa, I didn’t know quite what to expect. I applied for the externship because I have always been interested in the history of South Africa, democratic reform and human rights law in general. My goal was to contribute to and experience, in some small way, the relatively impressive progress the country is making to enact and enforce human rights legislation in a place where such rights had been categorically denied.

My experience was extremely rewarding. My work with the Women’s Legal Centre (WLC) and Legal Aid Board provided me a practical education in comparative international, family, and criminal law. With Legal Aid I visited various levels, from magistrate’s court bail proceedings, juvenile court, and narcotics court, to regional court, to the Cape High Court (site of the Rodriguez trial). I even visited the notorious Pollsmoor Prison to meet with clients.

I researched international law at the WLC, which uses cases to advance women’s rights across South Africa through constitutional, impact litigation. In this young democracy, attorneys cite laws and cases from other nations; international examples bolster these arguments.

I also joined WLC attorneys in client consultations. Meeting the brave young women behind the cases I worked on was inspirational, and brought to life issues such as rape, adoption, divorce, and domestic violence. One day I found myself offering services to a young woman my age, who was raped and impregnated by a close family friend, hid the pregnancy, and gave her son up for adoption. She faced the bleak reality that she might have to testify about the rape in court to prevent the father of the child from adopting him. Another client, beaten and abused for years, fatally stabbed her boyfriend during a heated argument. The battered woman’s syndrome defense planned for her could strengthen the cases of women across South Africa, a country with shocking domestic violence statistics.

Living in South Africa exposed me to many issues facing a new democracy. As a foreigner, I had friends spanning racial and class lines. Once I had a dinner party and sat on the sidelines to hear friends of different races respectfully debate whether affirmative action is effective and fair. Many people in South Africa are looking forward and trying to reconcile the past in order to improve the country’s future. There is much to be done, but there are many passionate, positive people who wake up every day to work towards change.

I feel fortunate to have spent four months of my life in their presence and am deeply appreciative of the David S. Brown International Fellows Program for making the experience possible.

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