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“Children Have Rights!” chanted the small group of protestors, organized at the last minute, standing just outside the chain link fence topped with razor wire. That fence marked the perimeter of one of the state’s two residential facilities for juvenile delinquents. Facilities the state calls “training schools,” facilities that according to many experts are only training kids for the State penitentiary. In Mississippi and in several other states the training schools employ a harsh system, the boot camp model. This model creates an atmosphere that can very easily cross the line into abuse. Even in the best case scenario the boot camp model is ineffective at rehabilitation. Under funding and under staffing has transformed these training schools from places of rehabilitation into junior prisons where children find abuse rather than rehabilitation.

Standing in the rotunda of the state capitol, in front of a political rally, a former governor described it as the most cruel letter he had ever seen or heard of that came from a state capitol. This unsigned letter was sent out to notify 68,000 elderly and disabled people that, due to budget cuts, their Medicaid benefits would end in less than a month. In many cases these individuals depended on Medicaid for prescription drugs, drugs that they literally could not live without.

Those are a couple of the more memorable moments from my summer with The Mississippi Center for Justice (MCJ) made possible by PILP. MCJ is a non-profit public interest law firm that advocates on behalf of low-income and racially disadvantaged groups. MCJ works on several levels: providing individual representation for juveniles, litigating class action or “impact” law suits, lobbying the state legislature and other government officials, informing the public, working with community groups and grass roots efforts, and generally providing legal backing for the public interest community.

As an example MCJ is a member of the “Schoolhouse to Jailhouse” coalition, a coalition of community groups dedicated to stopping the pipeline that funnels students out of the classroom and into the juvenile justice system. MCJ has used the courts to gain access to one training school (and efforts are underway to get into the other training school). MCJ can then shed light on the abuses and injustices that occur there, and provide those youths with their right to have access to a lawyer. MCJ also represents juveniles in delinquency adjudications, trying to minimize the number of kids sent to the training schools. MCJ also provided expert testimony at hearings before legislative hearings on reforming the juvenile justice system and problems at the training schools.

One hot issue this summer was the slashing of Medicaid roles with very little notice to recipients. MCJ joined forces with several local advocacy groups and some major national groups such as the AARP. Political pressure has forced the governor to delay those cuts twice. The issue remains unresolved, but MCJ stands ready to provide legal assistance in the struggle to insure that people with low income have access to adequate health care.

MCJ was an incredible organization to work with because I had the opportunity to work on such a broad spectrum of issues, and on several levels. Shortly after walking through the doors on my first day, the advocacy director handed me a stack of files filled with information about

predatory financing, economic justice, felon disenfranchisement, the Freedom of Information Act, the Mississippi Public Records Act, the juvenile justice system, and the training schools litigation. In just the first two weeks, I had the opportunity to provide some assistance to MCJ in all of those different areas. Over the summer I spent time at the state capitol at a political rally, acted as a legal observer at a protest at the training schools, spoke to a group of highschool kids about contemporary social justice issues in Mississippi, traveled around the state signing up named plaintiffs for a potential class action law suit, and of course spent a fair amount of time doing legal research. MCJ is a very new organization and not very large, but they have already won some important victories and are helping to build and improve the relatively small public interest advocacy infrastructure that currently exists in Mississippi. I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to spend my summer contributing to the work of MCJ.