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This summer I worked at the Texas Civil Rights Project (TCRP), a civil rights impact litigation non-profit. Civil right litigation has been my dream for what I would do with my legal education. Without the PILP stipend, I would not have been able to work for such a great organization. During my 10 weeks at TCRP, I split my time between the Austin office and the South Texas Project office in the Rio Grande Valley. Because the experiences in the offices were so different, I feel like I had two awesome clerkships in one summer.

My first day on the job in Austin started very early on a Saturday morning. Jim Harrington, TCRP's director and long-time civil rights activist (you know, the kind of person that people in the know say "Oooo, him, he has done a lot for civil rights in Texas," which is a huge accomplishment if you know anything about Texas) drove my supervisor, Wayne Krause, and me three hours to Houston. There we met with the local disability rights community to start what would become a state-wide campaign to improve accessibility and bring awareness to disability discrimination on the 13th Anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Thus, right from the beginning I realized how rewarding it is to focus your attention and resources on the needs of an entire community of people. Every case that I worked on from there on out, I not only personally met and knew the clients, but I also realized that the case had been chosen to help a whole community of people who suffered the same discrimination or abuse.

TCRP relies heavily on law clerks, which gave me the ability to be part of all aspects of litigation. One case that I worked on from the ground up was a national origin discrimination case against the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS). DPS accepted Canadian documents to prove identity when people attempted to get a license or criminal background check, but not any other foreign identification. Many of our clients were undocumented women from Mexico who were married to abusive U.S. citizens and permanent residents. They needed criminal background checks in order to adjust their immigration status under the Violence Against Women Act. In addition, these women could not get driver's licenses, which would have allowed them to more easily escape their abusive situations. However, undocumented Canadian women could receive services from DPS by showing Canadian I.D. Therefore, I built a case from scratch against DPS for violation of equal protection under the Texas and U.S. Constitution. This was an extremely important case, because so many people in Texas are unable to drive legally or obtain insurance. In addition, people who can drive legally are in danger of being hit by a person who is driving without insurance, not by choice, but because they are discriminated against because they are not from Canada.

At the South Texas Project in San Juan, the office consisted of two small rooms in Cesar Chavez's Union del Pueblo Entero and United Farm Workers building. Being so close to the Union, which provides an array of social services to the community, made the working experience even more hands on than in Austin. One attorney, a office manager, an undergrad intern and I worked together, crammed into the little office. We all answered the phones, talked to Union members about where they could find legal help if we could not provide it, and occasionally took part of the day off to participate in

Union protests or celebrations. South Texas has a completely unique culture that is neither American nor Mexican. The amount of poverty and discrimination is extremely high, but an amazing community of activists and leaders work in “el Valle” to make social, economic and legal changes.

In a community-oriented case, the South Texas Project represented employees who sued a Catholic diocese and a bishop for union-busting. At several parishes, administrative workers had unionized under the UFW. The bishop replaced the priests who had signed the union contracts and the new priests fired all of the unionized workers. While this was clearly against many state and federal laws, religious organizations enjoy a sovereignty that makes a contract virtually unenforceable in court. While I helped draft pleadings and press releases, the parishioners supported the employees and protested the decision. Many community lawyers, all parishioners of the church, volunteered their time and resources to help support the employees against the Diocese. Every day I sat in on strategic discussions with a half-dozen talented attorneys. Not only did I get great legal experience in the case, but I saw the power that a community can wield to make changes happen.

TCRP is an incredible organization that gave me a ton of hands-on experience preparing litigation for both state and federal court. It also taught me the value and the power of working with the community to design litigation that will have wide-reaching effects. I am very appreciative of PILP for giving me such a great opportunity!