

NYWBA Foundation Grant Recipient Interned at inMotion

By Tanya George

As an NYWBA Foundation grant recipient, I interned at inMotion during Spring and Summer 2003. I first learned of inMotion at a panel discussion for students looking for internship opportunities during the fall semester of my first year at NYU Law School. I was interested in rounding out my first year of law school with some real-world legal experience, and, as my rent had just increased, I was hoping to find a paid position. My women's studies background and experience as a sexual assault peer educator drew me to inMotion. The part-time internship - paid for by NYWBA Foundation, Inc. -- turned out to be the most valuable learning experience of my spring semester; I enjoyed it so much that I ended up working there during the summer on a full-time basis. Even now I occasionally go in to help with client intake and to work on cases.

InMotion does amazing, much-needed work. It provides family and matrimonial legal services for low-income women, many of whom are victims of domestic violence. Throughout the year, inMotion offers training sessions for attorneys at large New York law firms that cover a range of legal issues including divorce, child support, child custody, and orders of protection. Additionally, inMotion finds representation for women in need of help by sending out a digest of current pro bono cases to inMotion-trained attorneys. InMotion also runs a program called the RITE workshop through which women learn to represent themselves in uncontested divorce proceedings with the help of legal assistants working pro bono. The organization is in the process of developing a similar workshop for battered immigrant women seeking residency through the VAWA self-petition process.

During my spring and summer internships, I was able to gain truly valuable legal experience. My responsibilities included conducting client intake and performing brief-writing services for pro se clients. On Thursdays, the Manhattan office has traditionally conducted client intake over the telephone, receiving women's calls from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. I and others in the office who were taking the calls would try to gather as much information as possible so that inMotion could try to place the women's cases with attorneys. If no attorneys were available, we would provide advice and counsel over the phone or give referrals to other organizations in the area. These calls were intense twenty- to forty-minute conversations in which women were discussing the details of their personal relationships, the abuse they suffered, and the kind of assistance they needed. Initially, when I decided to work for inMotion, I was quite sure that I would not like having such constant, intimate contact with clients and that I would have to stretch myself in order to do well in this area. However, within the first couple of weeks I discovered that I actually liked relating to women on such a personal level and that I had an aptitude for it. I became conscious of the fact that my role held much responsibility: the callers were often on the cusp of making life-changing decisions, and the smallest move on my part could tip the scale one way or the other.

Performing brief-writing services for pro se clients gave me the rare opportunity to meet with clients while still in law school. When a woman has been served with divorce papers, she has only twenty days to respond to her husband and the court with

either a Notice of Appearance or a Verified Answer. This is generally not enough time for inMotion to place a matter with an attorney, so I and others would fill the gap by helping clients to draft their papers, and thus avoid default. I met with several pro se clients to help them write about what they wanted to admit, deny, and counterclaim. I also wrote some motions to vacate default divorce judgments.

My work at inMotion was an essential component of my education during my first year of law school. I gained insight into the practice of law and the workings of a nonprofit organization - a much-needed balance to the first-year class schedule. Through giving referrals to other organizations, helping out with the benefit auction, and attending receptions honoring pro bono attorneys, I began to understand the web of legal services in New York and to figure out ways that I could continue to participate in the future. I am grateful to have established a connection with inMotion and the wonderful people who work there, and I am looking forward to working with them throughout my legal career.

WBASNY Legislation Day

On March 23, representatives from several WBASNY chapters will head for Albany en masse to meet with legislators about various pieces of pending and proposed legislation. By coordinating this group trip, WBASNY hopes to maximize its ability to persuade legislators on key issues for New Yorkers.

The WBASNY Legislative Committee and chapter legislative committees are currently deciding what legislation to focus on during the Legislation Day discussions. Some possibilities are as follows: (1) a proposal for a bill amending Domestic Relations Law (DRL) Section 170 to include provisions for no-fault divorce; (2) mental health legislation, known as "Timothy's Law," which makes health benefits for mental illness on a parity with benefits for other illnesses (this law will likely be agreed upon by both houses and signed by Governor Pataki in some form of compromise); (3) legislation regarding judges' consideration when setting bail of aggravated circumstances related to orders of protection; (4) legislation regarding the expansion of "family" within the law relating to orders of protection; (5) legislation relating to the burden of proof in modifications of orders of protection; and (6) legislation criminalizing the obstruction of 911 emergency phone calls.

For more information about Legislation Day and commentary on these issues, please contact Jane Bevans at (212) 699-4597 or e-mail her at szokie@aol.com.

SAVE THE DATE!

LEGISLATION DAY - March 23, 2004

Join us in Albany! WBASNY encourages NYWBA and all other chapters to send members to Albany for Legislation Day. Please contact Jane Bevans at (212) 699-4597 or email her at szokie@aol.com.