2012

My Internship at the Champaign State's Attorney's Office

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Recommended Citation
http://spark.parkland.edu/ih/3

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Sometimes in a person’s life there comes a course-altering moment that completely changes the rest of their life forever or at least has the potential to do so. One of these moments came for me when a state’s attorney lectured our pre-law club here at Parkland College in the spring of 2012. As he described his work and the upsides and downsides of it, I was fascinated and immediately wanted to learn more. Not only was this law and its daily application and enforcement, this was a constant mental challenge, something that was a must for whatever career I ended up in. Through this attorney, I was able to shadow one of his colleagues for several weeks, and I learned a lot of information about the inner workings of our legal system.

On my first day, I witnessed pre-trial hearings. From my seat in the jury box, I watched as the courtroom rapidly filled up with lawyers, the accused, and their families. The atmosphere can only be best described as odd. Lawyers mingled sociably with each other and their opponents, the state’s attorneys, while the accused and their cortege sat nervously on the hard bench seats. When the judge entered, all rose and business went very quickly. The judge would call the case and then the lawyer and in most cases, the accused person as well, would rise. The lawyer and the judge would then set a trial date. That is what pre-trial hearings are. They are basically a check-up on how the cases are progressing and a formal time to set the dates for bringing the case to court.

On my next shadowing, I witnessed two cases, both in juvenile court, though one was definitely no longer a child. The juvenile case was a first offense, resulting in a light sentence of
probation, community service, and good behavior. If the young person follows the orders, the prospects are good. The juvenile and his mother left the courtroom determined to beat the odds and change his behavior. The other case, however, did not end on such a sweet note.

This individual was in court for the latest of many offences around the country, the latest of which was committed here in Champaign County. Hence he was being tried here. This individual was the antithesis of the young juvenile who had been right before him. Time and again this individual had broken probation, leaving the judge no choice but to this time sentence him to prison. He had been amply warned without use.

The rest of the morning was spent watching as the state’s attorney that I was shadowing filed papers and arranged witnesses for the next day’s trial. She let me read several documents such as police reports and jury lists. It was very interesting to note the lengthy records of some suspects, yet at the same time, it was also very sobering. Here were individuals who had been in and out of the system for years at the taxpayers’ expense and who had no desire or ability to change. Therefore, they were just appearing before the judges time and again.

This time I was able to run a few errands for “my” attorney, strictly secretarial types of duties like fetching a print job from down the hall or dropping off a file in a particular bin. The attorney admits that a lot of what she does each day is secretarial work. This is a far cry from the portrayed image in Hollywood’s crime mysteries. She related that things are a lot more monotonous in reality than they are on the TV.

On my third visit to the courthouse, I witnessed the process where people who want to get off of their probation terms are heard and the decision is rendered. This process is still a little confusing to me. Then there was also a guilty plea to a second degree felony charge before the court went into recess.
My “shadow boss”, as I came to call the state’s attorney that I was working with, had me shadow another state’s attorney after that since she had no more cases to represent that morning. This other state’s attorney had two cases, both rather interesting. In the first case, the defendant failed to appear for his sentencing, thereby immediately revoking his bond and getting a warrant for his arrest. Hence it was slightly amusing when the courtroom door opened just a moment after the sentence had been pronounced and in walked the guilty party. Directly following the little hearing for continuance, he was handcuffed and led away into the prisoners’ corridor.

The second case, an aggravated domestic battery, was also interesting and displayed the clemency of the judge clearly. The accused party was in custody for failing to fulfill his probationary requirements and for failing to make contact with his probation officers for a number of months. This, the defendant claimed, was due to his current state of homelessness and his unfamiliarity with the area. It was clear that the judge did not buy this story, but still he sentenced him to one last chance at a community-based probation as the defendant had requested, over the insistence of the state that there to be a three-year incarceration period. The probation requirements were stiff and the violation of even one of them would be sufficient grounds for arrest and imprisonment for up to five years.

The next time that I arrived at the courthouse, I once again witnessed pre-trial hearings. These proceedings are a good example of how boring the life of a state’s attorney can be. Case after case, rising before the judge to represent the people when your case comes up, and almost without variance moving for the continuance of the case. This part of the job is very rote and predictable for the most part. Of course, it is always very interesting when the defendant fails to show up. Then there is always a warrant issued for their arrest and their bond is automatically forfeited. It is also interesting when the defendant shows up but his lawyer fails to appear, like
today. Then some times, too, cases are dropped and the person is acquitted and set free of incarceration or probation at the pre-trial hearings.

After pre-trial hearings, my shadow boss placed me in another courtroom to watch another state’s attorney cross-examining witnesses before the jury. This was a rape case and it was a good example of the more interesting side of a state’s attorney’s job. He thoroughly questioned the witnesses giving the testimonies, pulling out pertinent information. It was very interesting to listen to them testify.

In my fifth internship session, I saw several different courts. It had been Veteran’s Day the day before, so the court schedule had been bumped around a bit and there were some courts going on that usually were not in session on a Monday. For instance, there was drug court.

In drug court, the government is trying to rehabilitate those who have been convicted of drug possession by putting them through programs. If they successfully remain dry and their drug tests remain negative, then they eventually can graduate from drug court. Several there today were graduated amidst clapping from the audience. Others, though, were still struggling to be masters of themselves once again. With each one, the judge quietly praised their successes and pointed out their failures, urging them to keep what they had earned and to take responsibility for themselves and for their actions.

At the end of drug court, they also held mental court, with a case very similar to those in drug court. The case was also handled similarly, with the judge quietly reprimanding the individual in a paternal tone of voice for his misbehavior and non-compliance. This individual was given a day in jail in order to think about his problems and to find solutions for them. The judge stressed how this was not a punishment but was only meant to give him an opportunity to think.
When that had finished, my shadow boss placed me with another attorney, who had three guilty pleas. Then a half of an hour later, he was back in the court room for PTRs, or pre-trial hearings. As usual the court room filled up rapidly with the defendants and their families. The lawyers clustered around the front of the room around the state’s attorney’s table and the counsel’s table while they made small talk on anything and everything. And also as usual, some people failed to show up for their pre-trials and police warrants were summarily issued for them. The same had happened for a few people in the first session as well and so they now had a new crime on top of the one that they were about to serve their sentence for.

The next time I went to the courthouse it was two weeks later, due to the Thanksgiving holiday. This time my shadow boss left a message with the desk clerk that I should go and watch another state’s attorney argue a case in courtroom B. This was a case involving illegal drugs. The defendant appeared with his counsel along with the state’s attorney, who was representing the side of the people. This was a jury trial, and the jurors listened as the lawyers cross-examined the witnesses. For the first time, I got to hear opening arguments from both sides before they brought in the witnesses. I only got to hear the first three witnesses, all police officers. These were called by the state to testify against the defendant. Unfortunately, I was unable to return in the afternoon due to classes, for I would have very much liked to hear the arguments as they progressed. The state’s attorney did a good job of asking in-depth questions of each witness and laying all of the facts out in the open. This left little for the defendant’s attorney to probe at during his opportunity for cross-examination. Sometimes he would simply wave his right to cross-examine something, but one occasion he thoroughly grilled the police officer in the witness stand, asking many questions, a lot of which did not even have pertinence to the case and were merely periphery. It would have been very interesting to see how things turned out in the afternoon
arguments, for the defending attorney seemed to have little on which to base his claim that his client was merely knowledgeable of the drug business but did not actually distribute any of the materiel. This case was fascinating and reminded me of the reason why I wanted to practice law. I find the constant mental gymnastics and verbal parrying to be stimulating and so interesting. The next week, I found out that the state’s attorney had managed to win that case after a long hard battle. I suppose the defendant’s lawyer did not give up easily.

On the last day of my internship, I watched a murder trial argued by the professor from Parkland College that had first inspired me to be a state’s attorney. I thought it was a fitting end to my internship that I should watch him argue a case, especially since his roles are more administrative these days and he seldom argues cases in court anymore.

This case was a troubled one, having been heard twice before by a jury. Both times, they had failed to reach a verdict. The first time, it had resulted in a “hung” jury. This is what is called when the jury hearing the case fails to reach a unanimous decision. The second time, the trial ended in a “mistrial” due to the fact that one of the jurors on the panel started acting aberrantly and messed up the entire trial. Hence the defendant was yet un-sentenced almost two years after the crime for which he was accused was committed.

The state provided many witnesses and several pieces of evidence. They also played a video-taped recording of one of the times that the police questioned the defendant. This was a new form of evidence. None of the other trials I had seen had ever shown a video as evidence. The state’s attorney rolled in a huge flat screen TV and proceeded to set it up in front of the jurors’ box for them to watch. The recording was long and the jurors were dismissed for the night when it had finished, for it was late in the afternoon. I deeply wished that I could return the
next day to hear the conclusion, but that was impossible due to my classes. (Later that week, I found out that the jury had found him guilty, thereby ending a lengthy and drawn-out trial.)

In addition to shadowing the state’s attorney for a couple of months, I conducted an interview of my shadow boss on the details of her job. I learned that she often puts in 50 or 60 hour per week, yet only gets paid for 37 ½ of those hours. She works at all hours of the day, gets phone calls and text messages during the night, works weekends, and is constantly involved in her work. It was very easy to see that her work is easily all-consuming. However, she likes it. She feels that her strenuous efforts and sacrifices are making a difference in the world and that serves to motivate her in her stressful job.

In a job like hers, she related that the stress level can be very high. On a scale of 1 to 10, she said most days are about a 5, but that standing before a jury can make it a 9 ½ or a 10. Having to deliver bad news to a victim is also hard and stressful, she said. Another thing that is really hard in her job is witnessing the awful things that people do to one another, especially in matters of child and elder abuse.

Until interviewing her, I had not realized all of the functions of the state’s attorneys office. Their responsibilities go beyond preparing cases and representing the side of the people in a case. They act as the law firm for the county as well. They negotiate land purchases for the city, represent the county in law suits, and handle conservation violations, amongst other responsibilities. For instance, some attorneys in her office are currently involved in a suit with Carle Hospital over Carle’s taxes. They have other duties outside of their office as well. The state’s attorneys train police officers and attend lots of training sessions for their own improvement.
In order to become a state’s attorney, one only needs to be an attorney with a clean criminal record. He or she submits his resume with a cover letter and may be hired by the office. To be a good candidate, one must have good oratorical skills, familiar with police operations, able to handle stress, and be skilled at organization.

Some of the drawbacks to being a state’s attorney would be the constant stress and the pressure of deadlines as well as the crazy schedule. Also, there are certain dangers inherent to the job, dangers stemming from anonymous phone calls and angry relatives. However, I think that the worst aspect of the state’s attorney’s job is that they are required to be on scene for aggravated DUIs and homicides. That I think would be very hard to stomach, literally.

All in all, though, I really enjoyed my time at the courthouse. I learned a lot of the inner workings of the state’s attorneys’ office through my internship. I also gained a deeper understanding of our court system’s inner workings, thanks to the helpfulness of the state’s attorneys with whom I worked. They were always eager to answer questions and explain the finer points of cases for me whenever I asked. I very much appreciate their time and hope that someday soon, I may be working for them.