

Megan Young (Law) - Houston, Texas, Summer 2012

I spent 2 months of this summer with the Texas Defender Service's Houston office, and it was an unforgettable experience. TDS is a non-profit law firm with offices in Austin and Houston, and interns from Cambridge have been sent to Austin for a number of years. However, this year the decision was made to accept Cambridge interns at both locations, and I was one of three interns sent to Houston, the largest city in Texas. The internship is entirely unfunded, as TDS relies on donations and are thus unable to pay interns. As such, this grant was absolutely crucial in allowing me to take up the placement.

TDS works to improve representation in capital cases, focussing largely on appeals but also consulting with trial lawyers to improve available resources in this underfunded area of the law. In the UK, this would be viewed as a positive mission statement, but in Texas, there are many with strongly conservative views of capital punishment, and as such those in capital defence must work not only within a system biased towards prosecution, but also more generally within a society biased towards the death penalty.

Houston is a conservative city, and we encountered many people throughout the internship who were not in support of our work, perceiving it as, perhaps, trying to get murderers out of prison. I found that the Texan criminal justice system reflected this view to some extent, with many procedural bars and time restraints making defence work much more difficult. In reality, rather than releasing murderers, the work of TDS is to ensure procedural fairness and effective representation at all stages of the capital process. In my opinion, this is why organisations like TDS are so important – regardless of individual views on capital punishment it is crucial that every person accused of a crime has a fair and just trial, and has a realistic opportunity to challenge the verdict if convicted.

Houston is the fourth largest city in the USA, and is sprawling, with limited public transport. We did our best to manage the often unpredictable bus system, but I think that not having a car to travel directly to our destinations was a blessing in disguise – we got a firsthand look at the realities of life in Houston, meeting a huge range of people from elderly gentlemen with impeccable Southern manners, to those who clearly had been dealt a tough hand by life. TDS works on indigent defence, and the poverty suffered by some of those convicted of capital murder was initially unimaginable for interns from such a different background. We were shown around some of the poorest areas in Houston by one of our colleagues, and were shocked by the large and visible homeless population throughout the city. I think that, more than anything, this internship has opened my eyes to the disparities within our society, and the importance of working to represent those who are most in need.

Capital defence work inherently requires some level of emotional investment, and at times the work was difficult, knowing that the ultimate aim of the justice system was to end a life. However, at the same time this pushed us to go the extra mile in the tasks assigned, and I was inspired by the attorneys who dedicate their careers to such a difficult task.

I feel this internship has benefitted me in a number of ways. Our assignments largely consisted of legal research and writing memos, useful skills for my future career in law, and ones which have been honed during my time with TDS. I have met many wonderful people and truly experienced Southern hospitality in action. I have seen places which have broadened my mind and made me count my blessings, while simultaneously reminding me of the importance of the work of TDS. Most importantly for me, I have cemented my desire to continue with pro bono work in my professional career after graduating. I am very grateful to Pembroke College for allowing me these opportunities.

