



NYWBA Foundation NYU inMotion Intern Reports on Invaluable Opportunity to Develop Skills and Help Deserving Clients

NEW YORK WOMEN'S BAR ASSOCIATION
NEWSLETTER
September 2008

By Michera Brooks

I was very excited to spend this past Spring semester working as the NYWBA Foundation intern in the Bronx office of inMotion. As a second-year law student, I wanted an opportunity to take what I was learning and begin to apply those skills in a real world context rather than only in the classroom. The NYWBA Fellowship at inMotion was an opportunity to do just that—develop my legal knowledge and skills by working with skilled attorneys to help deserving clients.

InMotion assists low income women with immigration, family law, and divorce matters. In immigration, inMotion helps immigrant women who are victims of domestic violence petition for permanent resident status under VAWA, which allows these women to file without needing supporting documents or corroborating statements from their abusers. InMotion helps women in numerous areas of family law, including child custody and child support actions. As part of its matrimonial law practice, inMotion provides assistance for both contested and uncontested divorces.

InMotion has a comprehensive approach towards assisting the women who seeks its services, including the advice and counsel of

skilled attorneys and support staff, as well as a social services component to truly help address all the needs of the women served.

This comprehensive approach is key because often one legal issue brings with it a myriad of other issues and concerns. For example, a woman in the midst of a divorce action may have concerns about legal custody of her children, and also may be suffering from abuse but have fears about leaving the home because she is financially dependent upon her abuser.

InMotion's all-encompassing approach means that that woman can simultaneously be placed with attorneys that can advise her on the divorce and custody proceedings and with a social worker who can address her housing and other financial needs.

The coordination that occurs when people involved in various facets of the client's case are part of the same organization is beneficial for the client because it allows the attorneys and social workers to plan and strategize together to achieve the best possible outcome.

Not only does coordination result in a comprehensive approach that benefits the client, but there are practical benefits for clients working with one organization. Since inMotion assists low income women, it is



often difficult for them to take time off from work or to find proper childcare so that they can attend needed meetings or scheduled court dates. By having multiple matters dealt with at one time in one place, the clients are able to accomplish more while taking less time from work and family obligations.

During my Foundation internship at inMotion, I worked primarily with Margie Bechara, who handles pro se divorce cases for the Bronx office. Many clients are unaware that they can represent themselves in court. The pro se assistance aspect of inMotion prepares clients to represent themselves by helping them prepare the documents necessary for their divorce proceedings. Clients also are able to receive counsel and advice from an attorney such as Margie to help them plan, strategize, and know what to expect in court.

Pro se assistance is for women who have already been served with divorce papers. In New York, there is a very short window in which to file a response once divorce proceedings have been initiated. If no response is filed in the appropriate window, a default judgment may be entered. Therefore, it is crucial for a woman to file the necessary paperwork and preserve her right to incorporate terms of importance to her in the divorce.

Working in pro se assistance allowed me to have a lot of client interaction and to learn more about the substantive law surrounding divorce in New York. It was very rewarding to provide a woman with the guidance and tools she needed to seek a judgment in her favor. The women were relieved and extremely grateful to have someone guiding them through this complicated process.

In addition to my work on pro se divorce assistance, I also was exposed to other areas of law, primarily through conducting client intakes. Conducting intake means eliciting information from the client about her current legal matter or issue, any prior or pending legal matters, as well as personal history and other information pertinent to developing a complete picture of the present legal situation. In conducting client intakes, I was the caller's first point of contact with inMotion. I was responsible for listening to the caller's story, assessing her legal needs, and then deciding the appropriate placement within the organization to ensure that she received the support she needed. After assessment and referral on intake, I maintained contact with clients when necessary to follow-up on new developments in their cases. Being able to see the progression of a client's case was another unique learning experience. It allowed me to see how various issues and obstacles may impact a case and how the case strategy may have to change as a result.

My experience at inMotion provided me with the opportunity to increase my substantive knowledge, primarily in the areas of family and matrimonial law, and the opportunity for substantial client interaction. The clients I assisted had a myriad of issues and concerns, and it was very rewarding to help them find solutions. Though clients expressed frustration with the courts and what was happening in their lives, they expressed gratitude that a place like inMotion existed to help them get to a better place. I am grateful for the generosity of the New York Women's Bar Association Foundation because it allowed me to be a part of inMotion's extraordinary work.