

*Alexandra Clarke*

For the fourth year running, the International Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers offered two lucky Cambridge Family Law students the opportunity of a lifetime – a fully funded studentship hosted by an IAML member anywhere in the world.

We were required to write an essay in addition to supplying a CV and reference. My essay explored the balance between paternalism and children's rights, an area within Family Law of particular interest to me due to the competing values of respecting the autonomy of young people on one hand, and the public interest in protecting them on the other.



I was fortunate enough to be selected for the studentship and so in mid-September I jetted off for three weeks to Houston, Texas, where I was hosted by Laura Dale at her firm, Laura Dale & Associates.

At the firm, I was involved in an extremely wide variety of work. As the lawyers there operate in a solicitor-advocate system, I split my time between client meetings, depositions and document drafting in the office and court hearings at various locations across the State. I also witnessed alternative dispute resolution at work when I attended a heated arbitration and successful mediation.

I was fully immersed in all of the ongoing cases, encouraged to read through relevant documents and speak personally with clients; this in particular was a real privilege because I felt I was getting a unique insight into not only their legal proceedings, but their whole lives – that is the nature of family law and exactly why it is both so challenging and so rewarding.

My favourite aspect of the firm was its international reach – many of the cases we were working on involved parties from all over the world, some arguing about their marital estates, others desperately trying to secure the return of their abducted child. During my period at the firm, I worked on an individual project on the Hague Convention relating to international child abduction; my research and analysis focused on the various definitions of the term 'habitual residence' across different countries and even the different US court circuits. This was interesting because it demonstrated how courts can interpret the same words in very different ways, sometimes leading to drastically different outcomes. Writing this paper also helped me to familiarise myself with the US federal court system.

Being able to speak to and work with so many brilliant legal minds at the firm also taught me a great deal about the best way in which to approach sensitive family law work and general tricks of the trade.

Not only did I have a unique legal experience at the firm, but an unforgettable time outside work, exploring everything that Houston has to offer.

Taking advantage of the hot (some might say too hot!) sunny weather, I spent a lot of time outside: I visited the picturesque seaside town of Galveston and spent the afternoon on the beach, and cycled down the 'Buffalo Bayou'. On my first weekend, Laura and her husband took me to their summer house at a beautiful lake where I was even allowed to drive their boat!

I also enjoyed a trip to Austin where I experienced my first ever all-American football game, cheering on the Texas Longhorns! It was a true spectacle – everybody dressed in orange, clapping and chanting, a humungous marching band and even a real live Texan longhorn mascot! In what was perhaps a cultural clash, I then visited the stunning Texas State Capitol.

Houston was recently reported to be the most diverse city in the United States, which meant that I was able to experience a myriad of different cultures all in one place. The variety of influences from across the globe made Houston a really exciting place to explore – I ate baklava at the annual Greek festival, visited Houston's very own China Town and even spotted one English-style pub!



However, my favourite moments were truly Texan: I was taught countless entertaining local phrases, took a picture outside one of the oldest dance halls in Texas, tasted the most delicious Pecan Pie in the world and drove around in huge trucks whilst listening to country music. I even managed to buy an authentic pair of cowboy boots to complete my transformation into a true Texan! Having tried every possible different type of taco and fajita, I can also now legitimately claim to be an expert in the art of Tex-Mex cuisine.



Despite the endless fun I had during the three weeks, I must also stress how significant this studentship has been to my legal education and life generally: my experience at the firm has solidified my ambition to have a career in family law, because I enjoyed the varied and personal nature of the work so much. Schemes such as this one run by the IAML are so important because the outreach of family law to university students is significantly less prominent than, for example, the corporate branches. This sometimes causes graduates to doubt the viability of Family Law as a career option; having firsthand experience, even for just a few weeks, can make all the difference.

On a personal level, this adventure across the globe has also made me more intrepid, independent and confident to try new things, plus I have made many amazing new friends – and I definitely intend to return to the exciting State of Texas some day!

*Alexandra Clarke*

Finally, I must say a huge thank-you to the IAML, David Salter, Nick McBride and Jens Scherpe for making this incredible opportunity possible for me – and of course, to Laura, her family and everybody at the firm for making my time in Texas so special and memorable.