

For many years now, the International Academy of Family Lawyers has held a competition for students of family law at Cambridge University, whereby the winner has the opportunity to undertake a funded Studentship anywhere in the world. As part of the selection process, an essay had to be submitted, and I chose to write on the issue of asset distribution between cohabitants on the break down of their relationship, and the relevance of domestic contributions in determining this. I was fortunate enough to be selected, and with members of the Academy scattered all over the globe, chose to undertake this fantastic opportunity in Florida, where I was hosted by Melinda Gamot.

I spent two weeks at the Gamot Law Firm, specialist family attorneys with a particular focus on marital law. As a result of this, I was able to see many elements of the divorce process – not only the final hearing, but also the prolonged negotiations that go in to avoid a trial, the depositions of experts, and client consultations. It was particularly interesting to see the professional relationships between the attorneys and the collaborative approach that would be taken - despite the strongly adversarial attitudes of their clients. For the first few days of my Studentship, Melinda was also hosting the winner of the South African competition – Edward Mugerwa-Sekawabe. Having the comparative perspectives of three different jurisdictions on the various legal matters, as well as simply another opinion on the facts of issues and cases, really added to the academic experience.

The whole firm were incredibly welcoming and open, with a fantastic working atmosphere which meant even just spending time at the office was a pleasure! It was great to chat with Melinda about the cases she had going on, as it really highlighted the differences between Floridian and English law and the different policy values which underpin the jurisdictions. For me, this was particularly pronounced in the interpretation of the ‘best interests of the child’ principle in relation to the marital presumption of paternity. Whilst English law considers ‘best interests’ as being served by the pursuit of the biological truth, such that DNA testing is almost inevitable where there is any doubt, in Florida the presumption is far stronger. The policy preference for a cohesive family unit leaves the potential father who is not party to the marriage very much at the mercy of the husband: if there is no consent, even if this is as the husband is dead, there will be no test. The strength of this left Melinda with a challenging case involving surrogacy and same sex marriage – a formative case for state law on this area, requiring complex legal and policy based argument. Debating this issue, which would be handled so differently in an English court despite the same principle apparently underpinning it, really brought my undergraduate learning to life, and made it clear that, as Melinda had told me, family law is often at the frontier of social development – albeit this can manifest in many different ways.

Alongside spending time in court, observing for instance cross examination of parties and witnesses due to an issue of unpaid alimony, a day I found particularly interesting was the Florida Bar Bounds of Advocacy meeting. As Melinda is co-chairwoman of a committee rewriting and modernising the bounds of advocacy, I was able to observe discussions between attorneys, judges and other professionals as to the ethical standards which ought to be expected at the bar. Numerous topics were considered – for instance the treatment of children, the importance of professional cordiality, and the management of fees. The bounds were being modernised, thus seeing the extent to which the profession and society has changed since their initial drafting, and the new issues which were being considered (particularly the role of technology and the difficulties this poses), and the experienced discussion of the practitioners, was of great interest as someone with a desire to practise law in the future – something beyond the syllabus which can really only be experienced through hands on opportunities such as these.

Outside of the law, my Studentship was truly made by how incredibly hospitable Melinda and her family were during my stay. Getting to stay on a cattle ranch in Florida was about as significant a departure from Cambridge as is possible, and experiencing completely new things

outside of law (albeit somewhat reluctantly in the case of horse riding), truly helped make the trip an experience I won't forget. Driving past Trump's house, visiting the beach, and alligator watching were all interspersed between the heated divorces and complex financial arrangements – making the Studentship a unique experience in every sense.

Getting to chat with Melinda, members of her firm, and a number of judges and other professionals has truly confirmed my interest in family law. It has shown me how dynamic it is on a daily basis, and the importance of engaging with the underlying normative aspects of the debates – even outside a purely academic context. The convivial atmosphere of the attorneys and the more 'human orientated' approach, often lost at university amongst the expectations of a corporate career, was something I really enjoyed. I can't thank the IAFL enough for such an amazing opportunity!

I am hugely grateful to Claire Fenton-Glynn and David Salter for helping to organise such a fantastic experience – I can't wait to continue my studies in the department next year and I really do appreciate all your support. My experience however would not have been half of what it was were it not for the wonderful Melinda, Albert, and all the Murray family – you all truly went above and beyond in your welcome, and I can't thank you all enough.

