



RICHARD STUART KING JUSTICE FELLOW

UNDERGRAD: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

GRAD SCHOOL: UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO FACULTY OF LAW

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Why did you want to do the King Fellowship?

The importance of revising and replacing consequential court forms that are too dense with legalese to be understood by the general public has for many years been acknowledged by attorneys and judges alike in Tennessee's lower courts. When I was a TJC intern, Gordon Bonnyman introduced me to the forms served to defendants in eviction cases. It was immediately clear that they were unreadable to anyone without a full legal education and did not even clearly indicate the nature of the lawsuit, or what was required of the recipient. The King Justice Fellowship was an unprecedented opportunity to rectify a serious injustice in the lower courts by allowing me to work full-time alongside interested court stakeholders who had too many demands on their own time to be able to create and revise new form designs and advocate for their adoption.

Can you share more about one of the client cases you helped with during your Fellowship?

While my duties as the King Justice Fellow did not entail working with TJC clients directly, I did handle a handful of cases during staff transitions. One of these cases involved a woman in her mid-nineties who was facing issues accessing her SNAP benefits. In one of our conversations, she told me she would be "getting evicted" in a few days. I found out that she had been served a court summons for an eviction case (called a "detainer warrant", of all things), which I was very familiar with. The form was so obscure that she and her son had both interpreted her court date as the date she would be evicted! I informed her that she had not yet lost her case. I was able to get her in contact with Legal Aid, who ended up negotiating a solution with her landlord that ensured she would not have to pack up and leave in her moment of need.

What were some of your favorite memories at TJC during your Fellowship?

Going to the General Sessions courthouse in downtown Nashville to gather feedback from litigants waiting for their hearings is an experience I will never forget. It not only humbled me as a sheltered university student, but it solidified my conviction that the work I was doing would make a serious difference in the lives of some of Tennessee's most vulnerable individuals by giving them a chance to fully engage with the justice system rather than be steamrolled by its arcane (and at times antebellum) approach to process service.

What's something you wish more people knew about (health care coverage/nutrition safety net)?

I wish more people knew about real consequences engendered when people who cannot read legal English at a post-graduate level or afford a trained attorney to interpret it for them are presented with an obscure legal document that holds the fate of their finances, their family, and their future within its impenetrable words.

What were some skills you took away/learned from the fellowship?

The King Justice Fellowship put me directly into the role of a project leader and coordinator. I learned how to work around the schedules of legal professionals whose schedules were often demanding and inflexible to establish regular meeting times. I also became very familiar with the day-to-day workings of Tennessee's lower courts and the various overlapping (occasionally competing) interests of the judges, clerks, plaintiffs, defendants, attorneys, and even police who all used the same court form at different stages of the lawsuit process. Through this experience in my Fellowship, I was exposed to every level of the legal system and profession before even going to law school.

How did your time as a fellow shape you into who you are today and the work that you do?

I learned during my fellowship that something as seemingly small and insignificant as the language and design of a few court forms can mean the difference between losing or keeping tens of thousands of dollars. For many, if not most Tennesseans, that loss is ruinous. Being the King Justice Fellow convinced me that I would be fulfilled and empowered by a legal career to effect positive change on both systems and individuals. Today, I am three days away from beginning my first year of law school at the University of Toronto!

Did you have a typical routine during your fellowship, or did it vary from day-to-day?

My daily duties were largely determined by the schedules of the legal professionals I worked with on my form designs. I would have weekly meetings with a working group, and I would frequent the courthouse on Friday mornings to ensure that my designs were accessible to litigants. Quarterly, I would attend meetings of the Tennessee Supreme Court's Access to Justice Commission to present the progress of our working group. After my fellowship ended, our work was continued by many of the judges in our working group alongside consultants from the Pew Group. Our form designs continue to be revised and tested in some counties in pursuit of the goal of statewide adoption.

Do you have any advice for current and future TJC fellows?

The King Fellowship is a rare and precious opportunity to dedicate your full time towards making the lives of vulnerable Tennesseans safer, healthier, and more secure – helping them and their families to thrive for years to come by making enduring improvements to the legal systems and government programs that are aimed at (but often fall short of) giving them a fighting chance.