

Clinic Intern
Sara Ehret Makes a
Difference for Family



“I really feel that Sara Ehret went above and beyond to help us reach our goals! She knew that this matter was very dear in our hearts and really kept this in mind at all times. In the end, I truly felt that this case was just as important to her as it was for us. She really helped our family to be complete, and for that she will always have a special place in our hearts!”

– Client

Sara Ehret, a third-year law student from New London, Mo., made an immeasurable difference in the lives of five people: a family of four that for the first time considers itself complete and, surprisingly, her own life.

When Ehret was investigating which law school would be the best fit for her, the choice of Washburn University School of Law was relatively easy, primarily because of the live clinic opportunity. Last summer, she enrolled in Washburn Law Clinic with the goal of acquiring the ever-desirable practical experience that most employers seek. She practiced in family and immigration law, and she expected to handle divorce and child custody cases. The unforeseen case dear to her heart was a step-parent adoption.

The client wanted to adopt her stepson, a young boy whose life she had helped mold for the past five years and who called her mom. In fact, she was the only mom he had ever known. His dream was to have the same last name as his mom, dad, and little brother.

Ehret embarked on the case in mid-June and worked on it through its conclusion toward the end of August. She conferred numerous hours with the adoptive mom, who was very involved in the process and didn't want any surprises.

Ehret felt strongly that it was important to meet the child whose interests she would be representing, the “star of the show” as she called him. To make him feel as comfortable as possible, she met him at Baskin-Robbins for some ice cream. He was

quiet but did ask Ehret questions.

One of the first issues Ehret faced was interpreting the Kansas adoption statute. The statute was clearly written for a stepfather adoption, not a stepmother adoption. Ehret had to interpret the statute to apply the intent of the law and make sense of the various provisions.

In addition, Ehret had to research recent case law to determine when consent of the biological mother is required in a step-parent adoption. If the biological parents were married, attempted to marry, or their marriage was voided for some other reason, the mother's consent is required unless she failed to assume the duties of a parent for the last two years. On the other hand, if paternity was established by genetic testing, grounds for granting the adoption without parental consent are much broader.

Ehret spent a plethora of time researching and drafting a trial brief. In the process of many revisions, she learned the statute thoroughly.

“Clinic may not teach you all the answers, but it will definitely teach you where to look for the answers. All of the professors have a really good way of letting you find the answer,” said Ehret. “It is the one class I have taken where you can still have a safety net. It is walking with rails, and eventually you can take them off.”

When the case went to court, Ehret was confident she was ready. She had prepared direct examination, cross examination, and closing, but she didn't know whether the biological mother would show up at this



Sara Ehret

important hearing since she had not at the other scheduled meetings. “If she showed up, we knew that we would have to pull out all of the stops,” Ehret said. “We had witnesses, child support records, and phone books.”

As it turned out, the biological mom did not show up in court and her attorney was not granted the continuance she requested from the judge. Therefore, all Ehret had to do was establish that it was in the best interest of the child to grant the adoption.

“Professor [Lynette] Petty was a big proponent of having the child there to hear this part of the testimony,” said Ehret. The little boy was in the courtroom, very quietly waiting to see what would happen.

As his stepmom took the stand to establish that she was qualified as a fit parent, the little boy cheered her on and gave her a thumbs up.

The judge granted the adoption that day.

It was a hard case for Ehret to close as she became close to the family. She said it was important to have a strong support network with a case that pulls on your emotions. She leaned on her own family to help her through the case.

After the conclusion, she called her dad. His words to her: “You wanted this for so long, and today you became a lawyer.” 