



**Jason McIlrath, '15, Assistant District Attorney,  
Discovers Passion Working With Legal Interns**

For the last four years I have worked as a criminal prosecutor for the City of Topeka and the Shawnee County District Attorney's Office. The cases I have prosecuted range from loose dogs in the city to murder; I have had the opportunity to see everything. Despite the complexity and intrigue of high-end felony cases, I discovered my greatest passion in working with legal interns on both sides of a criminal case.

My current assignment gives me regular opportunities to work opposite Washburn Law Clinic interns. Although the cases are generally lower

stakes and sometimes not even adversarial, the service Washburn Law Clinic interns provide serves as a reminder of the proper practice of law. I am always very appreciative of the level of preparation, professionalism, and respect that Law Clinic interns bring to court when handling a case.

A common area where I have the opportunity to interface with Law Clinic interns is at the criminal expungement docket. For a self-represented individual this type of case can often be difficult to navigate. These cases require a lot of paperwork and investigation with little room for error and they often deal with subject matter that can be embarrassing for the petitioner. As a prosecutor, I find myself regularly frustrated at the amount of disarray and chaos involved from opposing counsel--even seasoned attorneys. Despite the potential for error, the interns from the Washburn Law Clinic are always prepared; they always have the proper paperwork that has been previously prepared; and they manage themselves in the courtroom in a manner expected of licensed attorneys. The pattern established by Law Clinic interns has created a reputation for a high level of work product on their cases. I trust them to know the case. I trust them to know the rules.

This attention to detail and knowledge of the law is somewhat expected. As a graduate of Washburn Law and a participant in the Washburn Law Clinic, I am aware of the standards and preparation for practice that exist. I spent two semesters in the Family Law Clinic pursuing what I thought would be my life-long basis for practice. Although I have made a dramatic change from divorce court to criminal trial court, the lessons provided by Washburn Law Clinic remain the same. I recall several instances of coming to the courtroom to argue a

case or present evidence on a hearing only to have the opposing side show up woefully unprepared and in need of a continued court date. Not only is that type of behavior frustrating, it is unprofessional, and undercuts your client's position. A lesson that was taught to me early on and has benefited me ever since is to remember that no matter the perceived importance of the hearing or the subject matter, be prepared. Many would argue that a pro se expungement hearing is of little importance in the grand scheme of the District Court, but it should never be forgotten that for the petitioner, it is probably the most important thing going on in their life.

This mindset is what I appreciate most of all from the interns that come from the Law Clinic. I have had many one-on-one meetings with interns in my office regarding misdemeanor or traffic cases. These meetings are always more than just an argument of the legal aspects of a case; Clinic interns explain to me the position of their client in life, possible solutions for the case, and recommendations for disposition that are fair to justice but also their client. It is a breath of fresh air to sit and discuss the global consequences of a case with someone who has taken the time to explore with their clients all of the moving parts that are often involved in receiving a criminal conviction.

I have tried to remember and apply these lessons about preparation, legal knowledge, and case examination since the time I left the clinic. Four years later I am working with Clinic interns who are doing the same thing. There are many attorneys who pass the bar and will become licensed to practice law; however, it is those who take the time to remember the basic lessons, like those learned from Law Clinic, who excel and create lasting reputations in the legal community. Having

experienced what Clinic offers, I am continually grateful for the chance I had to build a foundation for practice while still in school. It is more than writing briefs or doing legal research, it is real life cases with real life consequences and an opportunity to employ the tools and skills learned in school before graduation.

**-Jason McIlrath, '15**