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The Honorable Charles McGee
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Mending the "House Divided"

Mediation Clinic

Seated around a casual table in one of the courthouses of Family Court, clinic students have been working with this couple for three hours. They have helped Mom and Dad find a mediation schedule they can both agree to and helped the couple to-once again divide up all of their debts and assets, but they’re stuck on Mom’s request for spousal support. The students facilitate the meeting, but they are in no way privy to each spouse’s secret thoughts, and during these meetings they use questions to help the parties find common ground.

It’s only then that the student mediators truly realize how important their work was in helping this couple find their own settlement terms. The mediators have moved to the other side of the bar and watch from the gallery as the judge reads the agreement they drafted into the record and grants the couple the divorce they were seeking.

The mediators have represented couples on asset/debt distribution, family court with divorcing/divorced couples on asset/debt distribution, child/spousal support issues, and parenting plans. Students gain hands-on experience in mediation services agencies.

You’re My What?

Juvenile Justice Clinic

Representing children who have been charged with crimes has its challenges, not the least of which is getting them to understand what it means to be their lawyer. Children can be distrustful of adults and other believe that their lawyers must tell the judge everything they discuss to them, even when the lawyers have told the clients a dozen times that it’s not true.

Students in the Juvenile Justice Clinic must adapt to a wide range of unusual characteristics in their clients. For one student, this meant representing a nine-year-old child charged with setting the family home on fire and later being declared incompetent to stand trial, and then advocating for dismissal of three-year-old burglary charges belatedly brought against a 20-year-old who just moved in with the family. The students decide to meet privately with their clients. For one student, this meant representing a nine-year-old child charged with setting the family home on fire and later being declared incompetent to stand trial, and then advocating for dismissal of three-year-old burglary charges belatedly brought against a 20-year-old who just moved in with the family. The students decide to meet privately with their clients. In the end, though, the clinic’s clients come to know that they have someone on their side, and that “I’m your lawyer” is more than just an empty phrase.
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The mediators have moved to the other side of the bar and watch from the gallery as the judge reads her entrance.

The clerk appears, along with the court officer and soon the judge makes a fixed length of time. One of the mediators makes a call and the room suddenly becomes a court.

Wheels are set in motion with a couple’s agreement to attempt to resolve their case before trial. The mediator asks whether either spouse has engaged in any behavior that would make them unsuitable to mediate.

Are they ready to take a chance? Do they have a strategy? Who needs to be included in the process?

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In between these extremes, students face an array of clients with problems for which the juvenile justice system once promised, but no longer offers, solutions. In the end, though, the clinic’s clients come to know that they have someone on their side, and that “I’m your lawyer” is more than just an opening line.
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When they get them back together, the couple agrees on the amount Dad will pay for a fixed length of time. One of the mediators makes a call and the case suddenly becomes a court.

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Building Communities, Changing Lives
Thomas & Mack Legal Clinic & Clinical Studies Program

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