

Catherine Bentley's Experience

This one goes out to all rising members of the defender community—I see you and more importantly, I FEEL you. As a 2020 law grad who engaged in the hiring process during the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, I too felt the anxiety you are no doubt experiencing when thinking about what comes next. Let me tell you, the whispers of hiring freezes and that nagging voice in your head (the one telling you no one will hire you with no courtroom experience) (and also the other one screaming ‘HOW am I supposed to get courtroom experience over ZOOM?!’) will not win in the end. It will all work out.

When the pandemic shifted life online in March, I was two months into a Rule 9 externship doing PD work but had yet to appear in court. At that point, I had been rejected from seven defender offices and was self-conscious about how my lack of courtroom experience was impacting my hiring prospects. I was looking forward to my first appearance when COVID-19 said “hold my beer” and closed the courts. I began to question whether I would ever be a defender and felt lost. I kept interviewing, working part-time in my same position after graduation, and leaned on my mentors for support. Eventually, in August, I was not only offered my current job but also a line defender position at my top choice office shortly thereafter.

In an effort to keep this short, and because lawyers LOVE lists, here are the highlights of what I learned and the advice most appropriate for future defenders:

- 1) Take the opportunity to do a Rule 9 externship the spring semester of your 3L year. Take it seriously. Even with our new Zoomworld, you will definitely have opportunities to provide client-centered, anti-racist, trauma-informed representation through interviewing, drafting motions, and e-filing. You may even have the option of appearing in court, too!
- 2) Become a practitioner of grace. If you are rejected from an office, give yourself some grace. Ask for feedback on yourself as an applicant and apply it to the next opportunity. The defender community transcends jurisdiction even though it may feel small sometimes.
- 3) There are no rules in a post-March 2020 world. Every single defender I interviewed with after the pandemic began not only showed me compassion and patience, but also asked for it in return. There is so much more going on behind the scenes (budget questions, office dynamics, etc) than just your resume. Sometimes you have to lead with your own brand of faith to outlast the spiritual limbo. (I didn’t hear from one opportunity until August after interviewing in March!)
- 4) Do not feel lasting shame about not having a job—only 25% of your graduating class is statistically slated for gainful employment come graduation. Do not let anyone make you feel smaller or less competent for still being inside of the hiring process. Most of my mentors were rejected from offices or bounced around before finding their footing. Be wary and understand that urgency is a function of the delusions of white supremacy. You will land exactly where you should, when you should.
- 5) Engage deeply with introspection to identify what brought you to this work (I recommend the Audre Lorde Questionnaire to Oneself.) Identifying your principles, framework, and biases will illuminate the ways you can apply a PD mindset to wherever you land, no matter if that is as an entry-level line defender or a civil collateral consequences defense attorney at a firm. Whatever being a defender means to you—lean in and embolden yourself to bring that lens to whatever work you do. This will not only make you a stronger applicant in your job search, but also a stronger defender for our community and our clients.