**Placement: Chatham County Juvenile Court**

**School: Mercer University School of Law**

This summer, I had the pleasure of interning at the Chatham County Juvenile Court, working on a variety of projects and activities. Practicing my legal research and writing skills, I produced three legal memoranda to assist judges in both particular and general cases. One memorandum focused on the application of interstate adoption law on a complex set of facts in an ongoing dependency case. The other two memoranda for presiding Judge Cole concerned judicial decision-making: a judge’s latitude in granting and denying motions to withdraw in juvenile court and a judge’s scope in considering evidence during the disposition stage in a delinquency case. I drafted a few dependency orders, crafted suggestions on areas of impact for Jude Cole’s involvement with statewide reform efforts, helped edit marketing material for the court’s family treatment court, and observed many dependency, delinquency, and accountability court hearings. A few spontaneous opportunities happened, too, such as getting to assist the court’s summer camp for court-involved youth, Camp Wellness, for a day.

My internship taught me what team-oriented child advocacy needs to be. Through my observation opportunities, I got to see in real time how the different voices—SAAG, public defender, DFCS, child attorney, parent attorney(s), CASA—are in conversation with the judges. I primarily observed the hearings of Judge Cole and Judge Formey, both of whom also debriefed with me a few times after the hearings. They emphasized how the multiplicity of voices reflects the complex needs of both the youth and the greater community. It was interesting to see how the judges’ personalities made each courtroom unique. Both utilized all those voices to influence their decision-making, sometimes engaging in extensive conversations with certain attorneys.

In a slightly bigger picture, this showed me how everyone in the courtroom plays a vital part in ensuring a child’s circumstances move towards wellness. Each professional’s perspective is important, and the effort they put into their in-court representation translates to how the court moves forward. The judge has the job to incorporate everyone’s perspective meaningfully, lawfully, and practically into their decisions. Though briefly, I observed Judge Kramer’s accountability court inspired Supervised Intensive Probation program and a dependency hearing of Judge Singleton.

Judge Cole discussed with me how the judge’s role extends beyond the courtroom. The Juvenile Code itself encourages the court to engage with stakeholders and community partners in many ways to improve the efficiency of the court and treatment of youth and families. Assisting Judge Cole, I learned how community engagement works at a systemic level. I researched potential gaps in statutory provisions for accountability courts in adult courts versus juvenile courts within Georgia. Judge Cole became chairperson of the Council of Accountability Court Judges (CACJ), which allows him to be a member of the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC). I researched potential areas of impact while being involved in CJCC.

I helped prepare support material for the participants in Judge Cole and well-known child advocacy professional, Ms. Angela Orkin’s, presentation at the end of the summer NACC conference. The presentation is to help child representatives better understand ways to make system-level change in their courthouses and beyond: whether it means creating a centralized child advocate office like Chatham County Juvenile Court did or helping raise the bar in professional expectations, etc. I surveyed the available legal, research, and ‘handbook’ type material on systems-level advocacy in preparing the support material. Through all these efforts, I spent extensive time learning about the expansive potential of a juvenile court beyond “just” dependency and delinquency hearings, and common obstacles to tap into that potential.

I observed each of the three accountability courts the court hosts. Judge Cole leads ANCHOR court, the family treatment court. Judge Formey leads the two juvenile treatment courts, HOPE court, which focuses on youth who have been subject to sexual exploitation, and SPARC court, which focuses on youth who have serious mental health diagnoses. Observing staffing for each court was the most vivid example of how team-oriented juvenile courts can be. Each court's team consists of a dozen or more diverse professionals, from the judge, staff attorney, DFCS, to social workers, mental health professionals, and beyond. Listening in on each team as they assess the progress of each program participant showed me how beneficial it is to understand the needs of each individual in a multidisciplinary way. I learned that a court’s ability to support a child and/or family is directly related to its ability to address the unmet needs that caused them to be court-involved.

Judge Formey provided mentorship in understanding the complexity of both accountability courts and dependency/delinquency hearings. I learned from her that it is important to understand the limitations and capacities of who and what we are working with. A youth’s family may have complex needs that vary case by case, and while the court must focus on the youth’s needs first, the family system is still there, impacting their reality, i.e., how successfully youth move through an accountability court program. In a professional sense, she reminded me that every juvenile court has varying access to resources in funds and personnel, and that Chatham County Juvenile Court is an exception in the region, not merely in intention, but in resources. In HOPE court, Judge Formey addressed how one of the CSEC hotlines that the team heavily relied on for referrals no longer operates. She encouraged resilient and creative approaches to referrals, delegating certain staff to take charge in forging those approaches. Child advocacy is a complex and multifaceted world, working under many constraints, and on the ground, leadership is helpful in maximizing the potential of each juvenile court.

The complex interstate adoption case was the most memorable project for me. It involved a dependent youth who was in a complex dependency situation before moving to Georgia and ended up in a new, complex dependency situation after moving to Georgia, essentially being in an uncertain legal limbo. I worked closely with Judge Formey’s staff attorney, Ms. Nicole Kulic, on the project. My responsibility had two parts: first, to complete the research memorandum that would help clarify the options the court legally had in moving forward, and the second was to draft an order for moving the case forward using the conclusions from the memo. This ended up spanning from around the second week of my internship till the final week. Working with Ms. Kulic was wonderful. Through the summer, we had many interesting conversations about the questions of the case and the field of juvenile law. A side note: Ms. Kulic and several other staff at the court shared their significant out-of-state practice experiences. I found a renewed respect for folks with diverse backgrounds in the law, even within child welfare.

Overall, I believe the court taught me and impacted me much more than I impacted it, yet I did impact in a few meaningful ways. In the interstate adoption case, I was able to do the necessary deep dive into statutes and caselaw in Georgia and across the country, saving much time for the staff attorney. The court, moving forward, moves forward in more confidence because of my research. Practically, this may only help a few types of cases within the lay of the law as it is, but to even help the particular youth of the specific case, in a small way, felt very empowering. The miscellaneous research I did for Judge Cole will help him as a judge on his bench and as a leader in child welfare reform. The case law and statutes I gathered and analyzed for him will help guide him in his own discretionary decisions. While I did not directly change child advocacy law or practice in or outside the courtroom, I did assist a key leader in the field by saving Judge Cole time in smaller research questions and providing helpful insights that strengthen the foundation to future, complex efforts in reform and change.

There are a few small, but practical impacts. My edits and suggestions for the ANCHOR court marketing material will help both DFCS’s offices and the court personnel in recruiting more parent participants. It was cool to pull in some of my non-legal skillsets for this project, such as my years of being a social media manager. It was a further reminder that something like accountability courts takes a truly interdisciplinary set of skills. As a part of the memo on motions to withdraw, I also created a checklist that translates the Superior Court Rule 4.3 requirements into a usable tool to vet motions, facilitating the process of granting or denying such motions. While at first it seemed like an easy decision to simply ‘let go’ of attorneys who do not or cannot be involved in cases, slowing down and breaking down the relevant statute (and reading relevant caselaw) helped me see that there are complex ethical and practical questions to withdrawal. This process also led me to draft model orders for conditionally withdrawing a motion and granting a motion.

Judge Cole, the ESCAP intern for the Chatham County Child Advocate last summer, and I participated in an interview with the local county government reporter. In the interview, each of us shared our motivation to pursue a career in juvenile law, the pros and cons of the field, etc. This effort was to help inspire conversation about child welfare as a profession and increase respect for the juvenile court as an important and vital part of the community. The published highlight quoted one of my full responses to a question, which made me feel honored, particularly because it was one of my favorite responses. I focused on how at the heart of a juvenile court’s potential is its preventative capacity, and this aspect captivates me most about the field. Helping youth tap into post-traumatic growth, being the village for families, and promoting generational healing is what I have learned is a juvenile court’s potential. I appreciated Judge Cole’s initiative in making this connection and interview happen, modeling yet again how community involvement is a key part of being a multifaceted leader and professional.

While I did not make a direct impact on future legislation or on reforming policy, practice, and procedure within the child advocacy field, I observed and learned from child welfare professionals who seek to raise the bar in trauma-informed policy, high-quality practice, and meaningful procedure. Judges set the standard in their courtroom and beyond. It was an irreplaceable learning experience to listen to, learn from, and observe judges who meaningfully manage expectations in their courtroom to better guide youth and families and further immerse themselves in reform efforts outside usual hearings via accountability courts and beyond. It is easy to understand how trauma-informed juvenile courts are important for maximizing child advocacy: getting to engage with complex questions and examples on how the practice of such knowledge works in real life is unique. Learning from Chatham County Juvenile Court’s work and leadership has given me a solid foundation in understanding juvenile law and will support me no matter where I will land in the child welfare field.

**Placement: Fulton County Juvenile Court – Judge Christopher Yokom**

**School: University of Georgia School of Law**

I spent my summer working for Judge Yokom and his staff in Fulton County Juvenile Court. I am so thankful for my experience there and for the incredible staff who welcomed me into 3B for the summer. As an intern, I spent my time observing court, drafting and reviewing judicial orders for both delinquency and dependency proceedings, and researching legal issues as they came before the court. Apart from these main areas of my work, I also did other smaller projects including: going through an adoption file to make sure everything was in order before an adoption hearing (and getting to see the adoption follow through); researching all of the legislative changes from the most recent Georgia legislative session that affect child welfare and juvenile proceedings; analyzing decisions from the Court of Appeals that were handed down recently; and auditing all of the judicial orders for every dependency hearing in our courtroom for this calendar year.

My favorite project during my internship was the research I did regarding two *pro se* litigants in one of our dependency cases. It was my job to research the motions that were filed by both of the parties and to advise the judge on what he should rule regarding the motions (whether to deny or grant the motions). As part of this research, I had to familiarize myself with the case and the posture of the parties. I went through the whole file and watched past hearings. I also went through the filed motions in detail. Both *pro se* parties had previously been appointed counsel, and I had to answer the question of whether the court was required to appoint another one. I conducted research into indigent parties and the extent of their right to counsel. As for the other motions, I conducted research by going through the Code and analyzing the statutory language about who may file what types of motions. I enjoyed this project because I felt like I got to really see it through to completion. While the next hearing is going to happen while I am no longer at the court, I got to see a final answer on the ruling of the motion and how my research made an impact on the case. I felt accomplished knowing that I had come up with an answer and was confident in my legal reasoning for that answer. I also felt like I was contributing to the case moving forward and helping the children eventually get to a place of permanency (even if it was in the most minuscule way).

I learned a couple of things about the field of child advocacy that surprised me. First, I did not realize just how rehabilitative juvenile court is. Coming into the summer, I really only had limited exposure to dependency proceedings, but knew almost nothing about delinquency proceedings. I also did not fully understand just how different juvenile court is from other courts. Juvenile court is one of rehabilitation, not of punishment. I knew this as a fact, but my summer in juvenile court allowed me to truly grasp what this means for the children and families who come into contact with the court. For kids who are charged with committing offenses, rehabilitation means giving them a chance to be more than the thing they did. It means recognizing them as a kid and equipping them with the resources to grow and learn from their mistake. I was so amazed this summer by the level of care the court has for these kids and how these professionals have an understanding of trauma, child development, therapy, socioeconomic influences, emotion, and compassion. I was surprised by just how many options there are for rehabilitation for youth and how many community organizations and non-profits the court partners with to make sure that these children and families receive the help they need. On the delinquency side, I appreciated seeing how the judges balanced acknowledging the harm done to society with the youth’s need for rehabilitation and growth, even after causing that harm. On the dependency side, I appreciated seeing how the judges and other parties worked with parents and families to come up with creative solutions and connect them to resources that would help them get to where they need to be.

Another thing that surprised me about the field of child advocacy was just how much professionals in this field are working together and must trust the work of those around them. In Fulton County Juvenile Court, the same few attorneys are assigned to the same courtrooms for both delinquency and dependency proceedings. I noticed from the start of my summer just how important it was that these attorneys and other professionals (like Guardian *ad Litems*, Probation Officers, etc.) all had relationships with one another. While each of them was showing up to the courtroom each day ready to advocate for their client, I was surprised by the level of communication and agreements between these attorneys. At the end of the day, each of these professionals knew they could trust that the other people in the courtroom had shown up and done their work. They could more easily come to an agreement or find a solution that would best serve a child and their family because they could work together. I appreciated seeing how these attorneys advocated for their clients and were still adversarial in that sense but still maintained relationships and trust in the courtroom. Even in seeing how the staff in chambers interacted with others and valued their relationships in the building, I learned this summer just how important it is to build and maintain real relationships as a lawyer, and especially in the field of child welfare.

I felt that my work had a very tangible impact on the court in that I was able to help the court catch up on orders by writing and reviewing orders for cases that were missing orders. Keeping orders updated allows the court to continue forward with cases and have updated information from past hearings. It is important to make sure that what the judge ordered in each hearing is actually written for the parties. I know that any backlog of orders can be a hindrance for the judge and his staff attorney to stay on top of, and I was glad to be able to contribute so directly to the work being done in chambers. Working on orders also allowed me to learn so much about the processes and timelines in juvenile court. I also was able to learn how to observe a hearing and then decipher what was important, what was a finding of fact, what was a conclusion of law, and what different things the judge could order. I also feel like my research and analysis on a few motions filed in our courtroom had a direct impact as the judge fully incorporated my research in his decision to rule a certain way. I got to see my work have a direct impact on a case. I am not sure if my work will result in future legislation or affect future courtroom practice, but it was interesting to see this summer that there is still room for change and improvement in the realm of child advocacy. For example, I did work analyzing writing that seemed to be at least partially drafted by AI. This sparked conversation about how the court and my judge would possibly deal with AI as it becomes a more prevalent issue. Though a good bit of my other research was case-specific to different motions or individual questions, I hope that my research on these topics throughout the summer will continue to help the court make decisions if those issues come back up in the future.

Overall, I am so, so grateful for the experience I had this summer through ESCAP. Far beyond the legal work I did and the skills I gained as a law student, I learned so much about humanity, professionalism, kindness, and respect. Juvenile court is a court that truly serves the people, and I am thankful to have been part of it for even a short while.

**Voices for Georgias Children**

**Georgia State University, Master of Public Administration**

The first project I worked on this summer as a Policy Intern at Voices for Georgia’s Children was to review the recently disseminated United Healthcare RFPs for Medicaid and Georgias Families 360. I was tasked with synthesizing information with relevance to our mission into a document that could be easily digested by my Supervisor, Senior Policy Analyst, Lesley Kelley. Voices wants to ensure they hold the new CMO, United Healthcare, accountable and that they are familiar with the resources being offered to vulnerable youth and their caregivers. The second project I worked on was to assist my supervisor in research and discussions in preparation for testimony regarding HR 611. This study committee on the complex issue of child “abandonment” at behavioral health facilities commences in September 25’ and legislators are turning to child welfare professionals for information. The process included the investigation of federal and state funding sources and child welfare adjacent programs, the enlistment of national policy workgroups in order to understand how other states have approached similar issues, discussions with attorneys on civil and legal repercussions and potential policy measures, and the development of visual aids in order to understand the possible placement of intervention and to assist in the identification of gaps in service.

As a Master of Public Administration student with a background in social work and psychology, the task of developing testimony for a study committee regarding child abandonment at behavioral health facilities was a fulfilling and full-circle moment. This is what I came to ESCAP to do. Under the supervision of an experienced policy analyst and advocate, this task allowed me to apply the knowledge and skills I have acquired in previous educational and professional settings to real-world issues in which policy change is seemingly inevitable. It further revealed the web-like intricacies that make up Georgia’s child welfare system. It better equipped me to ask myself and others the right questions, and how to arrive at answers. It demonstrated the level of thought, research, and emotional energy that goes into policy change and legislation. It afforded me the realization that the success of policy interventions might lie in systems and departments outside of the sometimes overlooked and underfunded “child-welfare” umbrella. Overall, if my small contribution can help to create legislation making Georgia a better place for just one child, parent, or family, that will be the reason this task was important to me. If it fails to do so, all the reasons stated above will have to suffice.

I believe my supervisor, Lesley Kelley, had a positive impact on my perceptions about child welfare and the work that is being done by Voices for Georgias Children. As an older intern, it was refreshing to have a supervisor who understood my journey and the general desire to be in a person-centered profession in which helping others is the outcome. Lesley demonstrated a consistent demeanor, understands the depth of her position, but also doesn’t seem to allow the work to be in control of her emotions. She helped me to further understand the thought exercises that go into policy development, the different levers to be considered, and the tough reality that sometimes you have to settle with little or no progress. Overall, I believe my time at Voices and under the tutelage of Lesley has improved my already positive perceptions regarding child welfare advocates in the State of Georgia.

The work that I contributed during my time at Voices for Georgias Children has the potential to result in future legislation in the support of youth with complex behavioral health needs. My supervisor is in direct contact with the Study Committee Chair and is working to produce a speaker line-up and develop a presentation examining the issue, relevant data, services needed, and what other states are doing. I believe this presentation will make its way into the study committee’s recommendations and could lead to legislation being drafted for the 2026 session. If not, I believe the work will help Voices, other advocates, and state legislators at least understand this complex situation and what policy interventions child welfare advocates recommend in supporting or combating its recurrence.

**Placement: Fulton County Juvenile Court**

**School: Southern University Law Center**

This summer, I had the privilege of working at the Fulton County Juvenile Court under the Honorable Judge Renata Turner. My placement gave me a close-up view of how juvenile court works and the many different parts of child advocacy. I worked on projects that involved legal research, creating educational materials, drafting court orders, and watching court proceedings. During the court’s administration week, I was able to explore other offices within the juvenile court system, including the Office of the Child’s Attorney, the Public Defender’s Office, and the District Attorney’s Office. Through these experiences, I saw how the law affects the real lives of youth and families, not just as rules on paper, but to create change, focus on rehabilitation and help people move forward.

My assignments ranged from nonlegal educational projects to substantive legal research. On the nonlegal side, I created one-page informational handouts designed specifically for youth appearing in court. These one-pagers broke down complex topics into accessible, engaging language with the goal of helping young people understand the systems that affect them. One compared juvenile and adult sentencing, highlighting the differences between a system focused on rehabilitation and one oriented toward punishment. Another addressed how education impacts income levels over a lifetime, encouraging youth to see the long-term value of staying in school. These materials were passed out in court to help bridge the gap between legal proceedings and the youth’s own understanding.

My legal research assignments were equally impactful. I researched whether indigent putative fathers are entitled to a court-appointed attorney in juvenile court, an issue that touches on fundamental due process rights and parental involvement in dependency and termination proceedings. I also researched when designated felony language should apply, which required analyzing statutory language, case law, and its implications for sentencing. Additionally, I tracked appellate court decisions, summarizing the facts, procedural history, and rulings in cases affecting juvenile court practice. These summaries served as a quick reference for my staff attorney, helping the whole juvenile court stay informed about emerging legal developments.

While I thoroughly enjoyed the legal projects and found that they strengthened my analytical skills and refined my ability to interpret and apply the law, my favorite assignments were the one-pagers. Even though they were not legal in nature, they provided youth with information that directly impacted their lives and could influence their choices moving forward. Creating materials that broke down complex topics into clear, relatable language gave me the opportunity to connect with the youth in a meaningful way. Seeing them distributed in court and knowing they might help a young person better understand the system they were navigating was very fulfilling.

Before my placement, I understood in theory that juvenile courts prioritized rehabilitation over punishment. What surprised me was seeing this philosophy in action and how deeply it shapes every aspect of the courtroom. Judge Turner consistently centered rehabilitation in her approach, ensuring that youth were not only held accountable but also guided toward growth. One question she posed to all the youth was: “Tell me what you learned from this situation.” Seeing this principle applied so intentionally was inspiring. It demonstrated that juvenile court is not simply about adjudicating offenses but about fostering positive change.

With my background in social services, I also came to appreciate that child advocacy requires a broad skill set, including legal analysis, communication, empathy, and the ability to navigate interconnected systems such as education, social services, and mental health. Attorneys in this field often serve as both legal advocates and connectors, ensuring that children and families have the tools and resources they need to succeed beyond the courtroom.

The projects I worked on had both immediate and potential long-term impacts on the court and the youth it serves. The appellate case summaries I prepared for the staff attorney gave her quick access to key developments in child welfare law, enabling her to share those insights with the rest of the court. This helped ensure that the court’s decision-making remained aligned with the most current legal precedent.

The youth focused one-pagers provided clear, accessible explanations of legal concepts and life skills, meeting young people where they are. Distributing them in court created an immediate educational opportunity, and over time, these materials can help foster greater understanding among youth navigating the system.

My legal research on indigent putative fathers’ rights has the potential to influence courtroom practice by equipping attorneys with the legal authority to request court-appointed counsel for these parents. This could lead to more equitable representation in proceedings with lifelong consequences.

While some of my contributions will have their greatest impact in the short term, such as informing attorneys about recent appellate decisions, others lay the groundwork for systemic improvement. In juvenile court, small steps often build toward larger changes in policy, practice, and public understanding. My time with the Fulton County Juvenile Court reinforced for me that advocacy happens on many levels: in the courtroom, in the research, and in everyday moments when a young person learns something that changes their perspective.

**Placement: Griffin Judicial Circuit – Judge Steven Ott & Judge Natalie Ashman**

**School: Atlanta’s John Marshall Law School**

This summer I had the pleasure of interning with Presiding Judge Ott and Assistant Judge Ashman in four counties: Fayette, Upson, Pike, and Spalding.  This experience was unlike any other for me for many reasons.  The number one being involved with a circuit court system vs an independent court system.  I found this to be highly beneficial because it exposed me to a variety of factors affecting outcomes of cases and recidivism.

Along with many hours spent inside the courtroom, I was also able to assist in drafting orders, researching current legal issues, and even providing certain recommendations to the Judges.  My main topics of research for the internship were: 1) What specific examples of harm have been found from ‘foster care drift’ in order to show there is harm from a continuation of DFCS care, and 2) Whether or not holding a case in abeyance, prior to adjudication, is aligned with statutory definitions and judicial interpretations of informal adjustments in Juvenile court.

Following weeks of research and writing, I was able to see the fruits of my dedication unfold.  Following an all-day legitimation hearing, Judge Ott was able to use my findings and case law from the harm memo to rule on the issue presented.  This was specifically noteworthy because of how and where the information was used.  I had thought these findings were only applicable to termination hearings; however, a lot of the cases provided relevant context to many other areas of the dependency process.

One thing I found riveting this summer was how a county’s *median household income* played into the resources offered to individuals.  For example, Fayette County has a much higher median household income compared to Upson County; when giving the disposition for a juvenile in Fayette County, counseling and therapy with diverse options and locations are available, and usually a mentor is provided in the order.  Whereas, in Upson County, the only resource to compare would be counseling – provided through a single community center with an intense schedule.  In practice, this disparity can mean that a child in Fayette County might have access to a dedicated juvenile defender, tailored treatment plans, and wraparound services: while a child in Upson County may face longer wait times, fewer program options, and less individualized support. These differences can shape not only the outcome of a case but also the long-term trajectory of a child’s rehabilitation and reintegration.

After seeing a Guardian Ad Litem fight for a child who is clearly in need of a Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility vs the Youth Detention Center, it highlighted the importance of bringing attention to rural juvenile systems.  This left the biggest impact on my professional career.  As an Atlanta-native, I always figured I would work somewhere close to the city; conversely, after experiencing the rural court systems of Georgia, I recognized the need for not only quality representation, but advocacy for resources.

Following my internship, I hope the Judges will use not only the memorandum of harm for their own findings but continue to share the paper with their colleagues.  I believe this provided insight into potential generalized findings and even affords evidence that could show a lack of reasonable efforts on the Department of Family and Children Services behalf.

Not only do I see this internship as an opportunity of growth for myself, but also for the Griffin Judicial Circuit going forward.  During my time with the judges, we discussed many topics, usually ranging from questions regarding the calendar to philosophical reasoning behind juvenile decisions.  I often mentioned how utilizing more interns through various hosts could be mutually beneficial going forward.  It was always fascinating hearing how the other attorneys in the courtroom utilized their interns, or their personal internships throughout law school.

While I know this internship helped me develop better courtroom behaviors and techniques, I hope it will also contribute to the evolving idea of collaboration inside the courtroom.  I believe these opportunities allow students to bring in new ideas, and new research on an already strained legal field.  Many of the individuals involved with the juvenile court understand the need for collaboration on identifying the best interests of every child, and creating platforms like ESCAP truly brought a new light to the juvenile circuit.

I feel overwhelmed with gratitude for being able to partake in this legendary experience.  The hours flew by us, and the experience left such a lasting impact on how I see myself as a lawyer, in the future.  It not only solidified my practice area but also created lasting connections that are invaluable to this field.

**Placement: Cobb County Juvenile Court – Judge Amber Patterson**

**School: Emory University School of Law**

This summer, I had the honor of working at Cobb County Juvenile Court under the direct supervision of Jill Roth, the Senior Judicial Staff Attorney. As the sole staff attorney supporting four Juvenile Court judges, Ms. Roth afforded me the unique opportunity to work closely with the entire bench, as well as shadow people working in all different roles of the court. During my internship, I observed a wide variety of court hearings ranging from dependency and delinquency cases to CHINS/runaways; I even observed a post-divorce custody dispute. I took detailed notes on these proceedings. I also had the opportunity to undertake a major project, drafting hundreds of missing court orders for closed dependency cases. I carefully reviewed the existing orders and evidence in each file. My drafts spanned the entire lifecycle of cases, from initial adjudication orders to case closure orders. I was also given complex legal issues to research, and I prepared memoranda on topics such as Ridge’s Law, adult guardianships for individuals deemed civilly incompetent, and the criteria for terminating parental rights.

One of the most valuable aspects of my experience was the freedom my supervisor gave me to shadow professionals in virtually every role within the Juvenile Court system. I followed Assistant District Attorneys, defense attorneys, intake and probation officers on the delinquency side, and shadowed child’s attorneys, parents’ attorneys, SAAGs, Guardians ad Litem, and CASA volunteers on the dependency side. I even accompanied a Guardian ad Litem on two home visits, one at a family home placement and another at a group home. My exposure extended beyond Cobb County, because Judge Patterson and Ms. Roth arranged visits with Judge Yokom in Fulton County and a SAAG in DeKalb County. They let me attend hearings in Superior Court and take a field trip to SafePaths Child Advocacy Center, where I learned about their work supporting children who disclose sexual abuse.

Throughout the summer, Ms. Roth also served as the emcee for several key events, including police officer trainings on youth intake policies; court personnel trainings on ICJ, ICPC, and UCCJEA statutes; updates on Georgia’s school attendance laws; and developments related to the policies concerning the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC). I assisted her with preparation for these events by researching pertinent topics, editing flyers, and making presentations. I attended the meetings, gaining exposure to influential figures in the field such as school administrators, police captains, judges, attorneys, and agency heads.

Among all the tasks I undertook, my biggest task by far was tackling the hundreds of missing court orders for both open and closed cases, but my favorite task was researching and drafting memoranda to address legal questions the judges presented. One memorable experience was when the most intimidating judge in the courthouse suddenly knocked on my office door, demanding immediate research on a pressing legal matter. The judge’s questions were challenging, often involving rare and complex issues, which made the work all the more engaging. Knowing that my research would directly influence judicial decisions impacting families, and potentially set legal precedents, was both thrilling and daunting.

For example, my first research assignment involved Ridge’s Law, a recent statute providing protections for parents accused of child abuse when they report unexplained injuries to their children. The law arose from a rare but impactful case where a child was removed from his parents due to severe injuries later explained by a medical condition. With only about 1,300 such cases reported annually in the U.S., compared to millions of births, it was a “one in a million” scenario that came before Cobb County Juvenile Court, and it was a privilege to conduct research on this topic because one such case had come before the court. This experience underscored the importance of cases that shape child welfare law.

My time at Cobb County Juvenile Court transformed my perspective on child advocacy. Initially, I believed the only way to improve outcomes was through education: educating parents, children, policymakers, attorneys, and decision-makers. This is slow, and people are stubborn and averse to change. However, I was surprised to discover a genuine willingness among professionals in the field to listen, learn, and implement change. Despite obstacles, such as funding losses for Judge Grannis’s R.I.S.I.N.G. specialty court aimed at preventing youth gang involvement, the commitment to innovation was clear. Even after this setback, rather than continuing to pursue the ever-fleeting funding, Judge Grannis made the decision to shift focus to creating a new accountability court, this one for victims of CSEC. He called together agency heads and advocates in collaborative meetings to develop next steps. The first meeting I observed took place in early June with three others, and by the beginning of August, he was hosting a catered event and had looped in over twenty attendees. Witnessing this ongoing progress in real time was inspiring.

A poignant moment came during a farewell lunch with my supervisor, Judge Grannis, and his assistant, where we discussed the substantial reforms in child welfare law over the past two decades, which he largely attributed to advocates like Professor Melissa Carter at Emory Law. It was enlightening to learn that policymakers actively engage with experts to quietly but steadily improve the system, whereas prior to this experience, and even prior to that conversation, I was under the impression that policymakers listened to themselves first and their constituents only in election season. Although the changes made often go unnoticed by the public, they are meaningful and ongoing. This understanding helped me move past my initial disillusionment and appreciate the resilience and dedication of those working in child advocacy.

The backlog of missing court orders that I previously mentioned was a longstanding issue in Cobb County Juvenile Court, caused by an attorney who had not completed their assignments over several years. When I began my internship, the court was still struggling with this problem. I was entrusted with drafting and revising orders on closed cases to help resolve the backlog. As I worked through the files, I discovered that each case often had far more missing orders than originally listed. Over the summer, the master list – once filled with red and yellow indicators – gradually turned green as I completed and submitted the orders. Court personnel were thrilled with the progress, and I was proud to lighten the load for my supervisor, who had previously borne this responsibility alone.

My supervisor, Ms. Roth, is an incredibly busy professional, balancing her role as the court’s sole judicial staff attorney with coordinating events and collaborating across agencies and counties. Her leadership and trust gave me the confidence to ask questions, no matter how silly they seemed, and to challenge traditional practices. For example, she shared how she had successfully spearheaded a grassroots movement to end the practice of routinely handcuffing all youth entering the courtroom. This empowered me to voice my observations and suggestions openly, hoping that even my brief time there would contribute to future improvements.

I hope my work this summer will have lasting effects on Cobb County Juvenile Court’s policies and procedures. The systemic improvements I helped advance through drafting orders are just one piece of the broader ongoing effort to enhance child welfare practices. More importantly, the openness I observed among court personnel and community stakeholders to embrace new ideas gives me hope that progress will continue. I was nervous to voice what felt like criticisms of a system that outdates me and will long outlast me, but people listened to my concerns with an open mind. While I may not see the full impact of my contributions firsthand, I am confident that the questions I raised and the enthusiasm I brought will resonate beyond my internship.

Overall, my summer internship at Cobb County Juvenile Court was a transformative experience. It deepened my understanding of the complexities of juvenile law, child advocacy, and the justice system’s role in protecting vulnerable youth. I witnessed firsthand the dedication of judges, attorneys, social workers, and advocates who tirelessly work to improve outcomes for children and families. Most importantly, I gained a renewed sense of hope; knowing that, even in the face of challenges, positive change is happening quietly but surely. This experience has not only enriched my legal skills but also reinforced my commitment to child advocacy as a future career path.

**Placement: The Honorable Caren E. Cloud, Fulton County Juvenile Court**

**School: University of Georgia School of Law**

I cannot overstate the gratitude I have for both ESCAP and Judge Cloud’s chambers for my experience this summer. This immersive, 10-week internship provided me with a wide breadth of learning opportunities of how the Georgia Juvenile Code applies to Fulton County families and has helped me to gain immense confidence in my desire to practice in the child welfare arena. Having recently completed my first year of law school, I felt it was important I was somewhere I would have consistent, quality observation opportunities since I would be unable to handle any cases under the Student Practice Rule this summer. My ESCAP experience post-1L could not have met my professional development needs at this point in my legal education better.

I spent my summer as a sponge – taking it all in observation-wise while also drafting and editing various memos and orders for Judge Cloud. As an intern, I also held the privilege of having time to conduct my own research projects born out of court observations and conversations held in chambers. On the first day at the courthouse, all of the judicial interns gathered for a training regarding the importance of judicial ethics with several judicial staff attorneys. This training was helpful in providing me with a framework for the judge’s ‘lane’ and emphasized to me the importance of the court receiving thorough, accurate evidence since judges are prohibited from conducting their own factual investigations of the cases they preside over. Out of the eight juvenile court judges on the bench in Fulton County, Judge Cloud was the most recently appointed in March 2024, meaning that she had “new judge” resources provided by the Council of Juvenile Court Judges of Georgia. She was always transparent with me on the learning curves she faces as a new judge and how grateful she is for her choice to represent almost every type of party in the juvenile court field.

Court observations were invaluable to my takeaways from this summer. Judge Cloud’s chambers, Courtroom 4C, heavily encouraged me to observe every courtroom in the building, and I benefited greatly from this endeavor. All of the judges’ styles varied from one another, but not in a way of polar opposite positioning. For example, some were methodical in the way they conducted their hearings, asking attorneys how the Juvenile Code applied to the facts they presented, whereas others were focused on caseworkers and probation officers writing highly detailed case plans, often ordering them to rewrite plans when they were too generic.

In my observations, I was fortunate enough to observe an emancipation hearing, a Denno hearing for a motion to suppress, several dually involved youths’ hearings, several emergency removal preliminary protective hearings, and many in-camera reviews with children. Anyone familiar with juvenile court knows emancipations are rare due to the burden of responsibility placed on the individual requesting emancipation. A child requesting emancipation must show the court they can pay rent on their own, understand how to obtain insurance, have an income, and also attend school full-time with satisfactory grades. The emancipation hearing I observed involved pro se parents who made many invalid objections based on their disagreement with factual matters and rarely made objections relating to legal issues. The Denno hearing centered around whether a child’s confession to an offense was a custodial interrogation, which required the investigator to read the child their Miranda rights. I was able to watch a few hours’ worth of testimony, but ultimately, the hearing was continued due to the need for another individual who worked with the investigator to be called to testify. Dually involved children have open dependency and delinquency cases, often one arising out of the other. The one that has stuck with me involved a child who was placed in a hotel with a behavioral aide in South Georgia, whose delinquency case consisted of a battery offense against this behavioral aide at the hotel.

Judge Cloud’s calendar was more dependency-focused this summer, and much of this focus involved the Department of Family and Children Services’ (DFCS) requests for emergency removals of children. Judge Cloud always pushed DFCS to prioritize the immediate safety concern to the children in their reasoning, as required by Georgia’s Juvenile Code. One of the emergency removals in Courtroom 4C presided over this summer related to a violation of a parent protective order (PPO), which required the legal guardian to ensure supervision of a sibling set at all times due to a psychosexual evaluation completed on the older sibling. When attempting to qualify the psychologist who completed the psychosexual evaluation, the parent-attorney asked the psychologist several questions about their education background and dissertation focus to which the psychologist answered they could not remember. Ultimately, the psychosexual was not entered into evidence.

Courtroom 4C consisted of a kind, deeply knowledgeable environment of women whom I learned a lot from professionally. Both Judge Cloud and her staff attorney, Kim Washington, have dedicated their entire careers to child welfare law, and I learned a lot about what it takes to produce good outcomes from court for the families on their caseload. For example, Judge Cloud is an enthusiastic broken record to parties about prioritizing the best outcomes for the children above all else as well as making sure that DFCS has properly alleged an “imminent” safety concern in the petition. Judge Cloud held 4C’s attorneys to high standards of advocacy and at the same time did not cross over into hostility or toxicity. She explained to me that in her experience, attorneys make better arguments when they respect opposing counsel, and at the same time, this does not mean disagreements are avoided or approached cautiously.

Judge Cloud has a strong background in educational advocacy, having worked for both the Truancy Intervention Project and Georgia Appleseed. With this background, she has developed a task force known as the School Expulsion Reentry Project. She has gathered together administration from Fulton County Schools and Atlanta Public Schools, DFCS, Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), YouthSpark, juvenile court public defenders, ADAs, Truancy Intervention Project, and Georgia Appleseed to address challenges families face with enrollment in these school systems when their children become involved in the delinquency system. I had the opportunity to sit in on one of their meetings this summer. Judge Cloud is focused on obtaining solutions around this issue identified in their meeting: schools will somehow get wind that a student was alleged to have committed an offense, and before being adjudicated delinquent, the school will either suspend or permanently expel this student without giving the student the opportunity to appeal their suspension/expulsion. This task force is in its beginning stages, having only been formed a few months ago, so it was interesting to observe these various professionals come together and articulate a universal goal, giving themselves the freedom to collaboratively brainstorm about potential solutions.

I had the opportunity to sit in on a few planning meetings for Youth Navigators, a cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) based program that Judge Cloud refers teen males on her delinquency caseload to. This program is run through the International Center for Adolescents in Need (iCAN), and this program has a three-pronged mission using CBT for mentoring relationships, therapy, and skills workshops. The second cohort of teens will start this program in early September and participate for twelve weeks of programming. She explained that she was impressed with the outcomes in the first cohort and believes this was due to the quality of engagement Youth Navigators implements; families receive more than empty referrals to various service providers. Instead, the program aims to engage families with any sort of assistance they can muster: food-wise, support-wise, transportation-wise, etc.

My daily responsibilities consisted of observing court, reviewing orders drafted by attorneys, and facilitating meaningful debrief sessions post-court with someone on 4C staff or an attorney in 4C. When observing court, I would always start by reading the relevant Juvenile Code section(s) prior to the hearing, making sure I was clear on what was legally required to be addressed in a preliminary protective hearing, arraignment, adjudication, disposition, status review, etc. Since I have yet to take evidence, most of my questions related to whether an attorney correctly followed an evidence rule. At the end of each day, I would discuss the day’s findings with Judge Cloud, Ms. Washington, the 4C judicial case manager, judicial assistant, my co-intern, or another attorney in the courtroom. I found debriefing to be crucial to my experience – I often would find out how I didn’t understand what happened in a proceeding, as well as I had originally thought, or had missed something important that someone else picked up on. Regarding orders, I similarly started with the Juvenile Code to determine what needed to be included in the document and would then re-watch the record to double-check no important testimony was left out of the findings of fact. Some orders were a mere one page, whereas others were fifteen to twenty. Reviewing orders enforced the importance of remaining detail oriented as an attorney; it really does affect a child’s case.

I drafted various case-specific memos for Judge Cloud relating to a petition to terminate temporary guardianship, a memo to enjoin the Department (DFCS) from further drug testing, and how to lay a proper foundation for evidence. Regarding the practical memo I wrote for how to lay a foundation, this arose out of numerous objections one attorney was making against the other due to their position that the attorney failed to follow the rules of evidence in laying a proper foundation for a medical record. Judge Cloud thought it would be a helpful exercise for me to teach myself how an attorney does properly lay a foundation, and once I drafted this memo with some edits, she sent it to the attorneys in 4C. I am optimistic this memo will improve advocacy efforts in 4C, reminding attorneys of the crucial nature of the rules of evidence.

The memo I wrote concerning the requested enjoinment of the Department was more advisory to Judge Cloud. A parent-attorney submitted this motion accompanied by four journalistic outlet sources reporting on concerns of DFCS’ unreliable drug screen companies. This motion emphasized the importance of remaining zealous for clients in putting concerns on the record to hold DFCS accountable.

I was most proud of my memo relating to the petition to terminate temporary guardianship for Judge Cloud. The case involves siblings who have been in the temporary guardianship of a relative for approximately five years. The mother lives out-of-state and has made significant progress since the guardianship was formed. Judge Cloud wanted the memo to tell her what factors she should consider, what standard of evidence was used, and what relevant Georgia case law could offer her guidance. I was able to locate four cases which delineated four factors the court may consider: (1) Who are the past and present caretakers of the child; (2) with whom has the child formed psychological bonds and how strong are those bonds; (3) have the competing parties evidenced interest in, and contact with, the child over time; and (4) does the child have unique medical or psychological needs that one party is better able to meet. I learned the court can use these factors to determine whether termination or continuation of the temporary guardianship is in the best interest of the child(ren) and applied this caselaw to the case at hand. It was an affirming moment using tools I had acquired during 1L to submit a work-product that a judge could use to decide a case outcome.

I could go on and on about how instrumental this summer has been for my legal education and future career. While this subject matter was often heavy, paired with the knowledge that the court does have the power to impact families for better or worse, this experience affirmed my desire to practice in the child welfare field. At the end of the summer, I realized most of the days had flown by, and I was looking at the time, noticing we had already made it to 5:00pm. I am filled with gratitude to have found a field so quickly that evokes intellectual passion as well as compassion, and I am hopeful to practice with these incredible mentors in the future!