

PERSONAL STATEMENT, AUGUST 2022
LAURA TAYLOR
BRONX DEFENDERS, BRONX, NEW YORK

I believe that I have been an advocate in various ways throughout my life. An advocate for myself as a child when convincing my parents to let me order dessert, an advocate for my sister when she spoke little English after moving to the U.S. at age 16, an advocate for those in need of healthcare through internships in college, an advocate for my peers to school leadership in college and law school, and now, an advocate for indigent folks in the criminal legal system through an internship with the Bronx Defenders organization. Throughout law school, I have been fortunate enough to represent clients in some way at both the trial and appellate level, ranging from low-level arraignment hearings at state trial courts to high-stakes innocence appeals to state supreme courts and federal appellate courts. It feels as though the majority of my life experiences have culminated in me becoming an advocate, or an adversary, in the legal system, and my passions have driven me to indigent defense in the criminal legal system.

However, being an advocate has not been entirely, or even primarily, arguing about issues on the merits and the most just person winning. In many ways, the best work that I have done in which my clients have secured the best outcomes is not based on having the winningest or most logical argument. Instead, I've learned that being amiable and providing as many reasons to rule in my favor to a judge as possible has been the best tactic. Working in criminal defense, for me anyway, has not been about making flashy arguments, but instead has been primarily about putting in as much work and research as possible and showing respect to the court, even when opposing counsel is not doing the same. When I entered law school, I did not understand how much of being an attorney is about being likable even when people dislike your argument, which is a skill and an art that I find more difficult to master than crafting complex legal arguments. The more work in indigent criminal defense, the more upset I get at this system that

is created to inflict harm, and it is often difficult to contrast the harm our clients face at the hands of the system with the respectful and almost reverent tone of the courtroom. Surely, too, many survivors that oppose my clients likely feel that the sterile and dispassionate nature of many courtroom proceedings cannot be what justice looks like, neither for themselves nor for the accused.

I think that my own life experience and circumstances have not been unique to lead me to this role, and I have been incredibly privileged to take a position of outrage at the system without being directly harmed by it. However, I do think that the privilege I have allows me to garner respect for controversial opinions, which is the nature of criminal defense. Not being unique in this system somehow gives me a form of power that I hope to wield to change the system, first through public defense and harm reduction, then hopefully in a more systemic way. I am currently in the process of interviewing for post-graduate positions as I enter my last year of law school. I have had the opportunity to interview with some amazing organizations thus far, and I hope that wherever I end up, I will be able to continue the work that began this summer, and that I could not have done without JJCF.