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Dean Logan's Blog

RWU Law 3L Takes Case "all the way" to the Supreme Court

Posted by David Logan on 04/15/2013 at 08:55 AM

RWU Law is rightfully proud of the many ways in which its students can gain invaluable practical experience, and one of the most popular of these programs is our Criminal Defense Clinic, where students handle misdemeanors in RI District Court. However, every once in a while what begins as a small case in a lower court actually makes its way to the big stage, i.e., the Supreme Court.

This happened just recently, as 3L Allison Belknap argued before the Rhode Island Supreme Court. Allison, in her third year at RWUSOL, is an accomplished member of the Moot Court Board and as a Rule 9 Student Attorney with the Criminal Defense Clinic, she handled her client, Doris Poulin's case before the Rhode Island Supreme Court.

The case raised the type of issue that junior lawyers may well face as they begin practicing law. In Rhode Island, if an individual is exonerated of a crime, they can seal their record. However, the Rhode Island statute does apply to people with felony convictions. Similarly, if an individual is convicted of a crime and is a first time offender, they can have their record expunged. The issue before the court in Ms. Poulin's case was whether a person who had pled nolo contendere to a felony charge and received probation was barred from having two dismissed misdemeanor cases sealed and removed from their record. The Rhode Island probation statute reads that a plea of nolo contendere followed by probation "shall not constitute a conviction for any purpose." Allison argued that under these statutes, her client was eligible for sealing, as she was exonerated of the two crimes and had not been convicted of a felony.

As the argument approached, Allison dug into the case law, consulted with local attorneys as well as RWU faculty and completed an amazing ten moots over the course of just a few weeks. Allison also undertook hours of additional legal research to ensure that she was prepared to argue before Rhode Island's highest court. The preparation certainly paid off as Allison's argument was well received. Over the course of the argument, Allison was asked a series of difficult questions, which she handled with the poise and confidence.



Here are Allison's reflections on her turn in the spotlight:

"I am truly grateful for having had the opportunity to argue before the Rhode Island Supreme Court and recognize that it could be a once in a lifetime experience, especially for a student. The feedback I received over the course of her practice moots was invaluable. And I am proud to have allowed my client's voice be heard in the state's highest court".

And this, from Allison's faculty supervisor Priya Lakhi:

"I am very proud of Allison's performance at the Supreme Court. She was passionate, articulate and zealous in her advocacy for her client. I have no doubt that Allison is going to have a very successful career".