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IN THEIR OWN WORDS: ADVANCING JUSTICE

THREE STUDENTS DESCRIBE MEMORABLE INTERNSHIPS.

by [Jim Hanchett](#) | May 4, 2021*Above: Sequoia Benhart at work at the Newport News commonwealth attorney's office**Read time: about 6 min*

Students in the [social work](#) program serve lengthy, challenging and ultimately rewarding internships. The reward comes from face-to-face service to the community that sets these internships and these students apart. We asked them to describe their experiences.

Sequoia Benhart '21**Social work**

On the first day of my internship at the Newport News commonwealth attorney's office in the Victim Services Unit, I was extremely intimidated. I felt like I was in no way qualified to address the needs of survivors of domestic violence. How could I, someone with minimal life experience and little-to-no knowledge on the subject, serve as an advocate to individuals experiencing such a serious form of trauma? Little did I know that I would become versed on the ins and outs of domestic violence and that this initially daunting internship would provide me experience in several different areas and serve as an extreme boost in my self confidence.

Looking back on that first day compared to now, I can confidently say that I have grown and learned immensely, not only about the field of advocacy but also about myself. Although I was initially hesitant about being placed in a setting where I would be in court frequently, my need to become trauma-informed and develop many professional skills, I certainly underestimated the amount of preparation that I had from attending my social work classes.

When I was first asked to engage with survivors on my own, I was reminded of our Social Work Practice course. We

role-played different client scenarios and developed skills including active listening, reflection and applying the strengths-based approach. Once I started to view my interactions with survivors the same way, I felt much more confident in my ability to communicate effectively and to understand their experiences better.

After all, we are all human beings who want to feel heard, supported and respected, and through my application of these skills, I feel that I was able to convey those feelings to these survivors.

The majority of the interactions I have had with survivors are through court accompaniment, where I attend various court proceedings with survivors as support and advocate on behalf of the case outcome they desire. I work closely with commonwealth's attorneys who prosecute these cases to communicate the needs of these individuals to ensure that they feel that their voice is heard throughout the court process.

I also contact survivors over the phone to update them on court proceedings and ensure that they feel safe after an incident involving law enforcement. It is essential to reach out to survivors of domestic violence within 24 hours of these incidents. Doing so lowers the likelihood that they will be persuaded to forgive their alleged abuser and stay with them, often repeating the cycle of domestic violence.

One significant interaction that I remember having with a survivor was a phone call that I made to a woman the day after her boyfriend had been arrested due to a domestic violence incident. This woman was the same age as me. When I called and spoke with her, she was very friendly and polite. She explained that this was all a misunderstanding and that she had spent all morning contacting different people trying to figure out how to get her boyfriend out of jail. She told me that they have two young children together, and she needs him at home to support them and be a father to his children.

This is a common conversation that I have with many people whose instinct is to protect the person they love, even after that person hurts them physically. Most of the time, I do not try to convince these people that they need to leave the person or point out what the police report indicates was done to them because, as a stranger, my words often do not carry much weight.

For some reason, though, I felt the instinct to try and reason with this woman and explain to her that she was worth so much more than the terrible things that this man had done to her. I spent almost an hour on the phone with this woman as she told me about her life and her relationship and how she believed in the best version of this man. I explained the situation from my perspective. I provided her with information on domestic violence services, but most of all, I listened to her and did my best to make her feel heard and supported.

The most valuable thing that I have learned at my internship, something that I could not have understood or prepared myself for on my first day, was that she is not the last person I will have that conversation with. I am not the last person who will try to explain why she deserves respect and safety, but if I can be the person to make one person feel supported and empowered enough to end the cycle, then I am doing my job as an advocate.

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People to People, a grassroots organization that formed almost 30 years ago, is made up of community leaders who are devoted to understanding race relations in Newport News through education, discussion and diversity. Allison Schurr and Faith Quel are interning with People to People.

Allison Schurr '22

Social work, [psychology](#), [President's Leadership Program](#) I was honored to be awarded an internship with People to People this semester in the area of criminal justice, focusing on the Newport News Police Department and the Newport News court system. I have worked closely with the assistant chief of administrative services, Lt. Brandon Creswell; Lt. Melissa Morgan and the commonwealth's attorney, Howard Gwynn, in exploring how racial relations affect our community. Using data from 2018, 2019 and 2020, I have analyzed "Part I Crimes Against Persons," including homicide/murder, rape, robbery and shootings. I am examining the racial makeup/demographics of victims and offenders and making comparisons with those demographics in the general population of Newport News. The goal is to identify and begin to understand disproportionalities that may exist.

My first time entering Newport News Police headquarters for our meeting was terrifying for me because I am so new to the world of policing – here is this institution which is so large and powerful, and I was coming into it with a

mindset of wanting to reform the criminal justice system. However, as soon as I sat down in the chief's conference room, I immediately felt like this was a place I belonged, a place to learn. While we discussed the goals of the internship, they opened my eyes to their massive database containing statistics on all of their crimes. This was overwhelming but seeing the numbers that represent real people throughout Newport News made me realize this work is vital to fostering a positive relationship between police and the community.

This internship has provided me with an invaluable experience that allows me to use skills such as data analysis that I have learned at Christopher Newport and apply them to real-world problems such as racial injustice. Further, I have had the amazing opportunity to work with many different professionals and community leaders. I have started to develop a sense of life after college and the hard work that I must put in each day in order to make a difference. I want to be a researcher, an educator and a fighter for social justice no matter the consequences. This opportunity has allowed me to take a dive deep into the issue of racial inequality in the criminal justice system – a system which I hope to help reform one day.

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Faith Quel '22

Social work, President's Leadership Program

My role is with the Newport News Redevelopment and Housing Authority, researching systemic racism in housing and development. I have been gathering information from housing authorities and professionals in Newport News to explore the history and ongoing impact of systemic racism in housing. One recent opportunity was a People to People event where researchers such as Dr. Johnny Finn from Christopher Newport and community leaders from the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities discussed the history of housing discrimination in our area. I gathered feedback in breakout rooms where community members were sharing their thoughts and experiences. The goal was to collect and organize this information to identify the areas people wanted to hear more about and get ideas to guide my research.

For example, two key topics were urban heat and pollution metrics that are higher in redlined neighborhoods. Overall, it was empowering to hear people expressing their points of view but it was disheartening to learn just how deep and far back these systems go that sustain discriminatory practices. That event in particular showed me how important this work is to shine a light on racial justice, especially in the area of housing.

Housing segregation and discrimination has been an issue in the United States for a very long time. One form of discrimination called redlining was originally created as a way to indicate where it was 'safe' to insure mortgages, separating White and Black neighborhoods and preventing African Americans from buying houses in White suburbs.

Redlining was first introduced in the 1940s, but still has a major impact on housing today and plays a large part in economic disparities between White and Black communities. In my research, I have learned that Newport News has a racially diverse population and we definitely see impacts of redlining here. Redlining can not only affect people's long-term wealth, but also funding for schools, access to fresh produce, access to a safe and clean environment and much more. It is my hope that with my research with People to People I can gather information to help educate more people on these aspects of systemic discrimination in housing. This will represent a step toward the fulfillment of People to People's mission which is to have an open dialogue to improve race relations by learning from each other and building diverse connections and relationships.