

An Interview with Samantha Armstrong, Esq.

by Nicole P. Dyszlewski, Esq., MLIS and Meghan L. Hopkins, Esq.

Focus on the Future is a spotlight series where members of the *Rhode Island Bar Journal* Editorial Board interview attorneys who are newer to the Rhode Island Bar.

> **What is your current title and position?**

In October 2020, I started my position as a staff attorney at Catholic Social Services of Fall River. My department is called ILEAP, which stands for Immigration Law Education & Advocacy Project. I work almost exclusively with asylum seekers, representing them before the immigration court and the asylum office.

> **What do you actually do all day?**

I talk to clients, prepare declarations, prepare affidavits, conduct research on country conditions, compile affidavits from family members, and gather evidence from sources like medical records or police reports. Most of my clients are from Central America. While I only know a limited amount of Spanish, we have great paralegals and an Americorps Legal Advocate who speak Spanish and help us with translation.

> **Can you tell us what you have learned while being a new attorney?**

Prior to starting in my position, I clerked for one year in the Law Clerk Department in Rhode Island Superior Court. Then I clerked for one year for Justice Robinson in Rhode Island Supreme Court. I had the opportunity to work with great judges and court staff, and I got to see countless numbers of attorneys in action. I learned the value of being kind to people, the value of being thorough, and the value of producing quality work when you are representing your clients. I learned that judges are people too. They are human and are concerned about others, about the litigants, and about how the results of cases will affect others. I never felt like anyone was trying to push their agenda, rather the judges I worked with were really focused on the impact of their decisions on others and the law.

> **Who is your biggest inspiration inside or outside of law?**

Within the law, I have been inspired by Justice Robinson, previous supervisors, and co-clerks. Justice Robinson inspires me to never stop learning and working hard. My mentors in practice have taught me how to interact with clients, how to draft documents, and even the importance of closely reviewing emails before hitting send. Outside of the law, Jesus is a role model for me in how I live and work. I work to treat people fairly and deny my own selfish tendencies. Jesus is a model of humility and grace and treating others fairly.

> **What do you do to de-stress?**

I like to spend time outside with the people I care about most—my husband and my kids. I like to take my dog for a walk or go for a hike. I also like to take my kids to the playground.

> **What is your favorite restaurant in Rhode Island?**

I love Mexican food, so Tallulah's Taqueria and the Burrito Bowl.

> **You are not originally from New England, how did you end up here?**

I met my husband in college in Auburn, AL. After college, I moved to



SAMANTHA ARMSTRONG, ESQ.

Nashville and he moved to New England to take a job in Groton, CT. I looked at law schools up here and then landed on Roger Williams and have never left. What I like most about this area is that you are always only a short drive, or even walking distance, from the coast or some body of water.

> **Name one thing that you could not live without and why?**

I could not live without Facetime or some video-calling app. All of our family members are spread across the country, and I need regular contact with my and my husband's family.

> **What is it like being a new attorney who is the working mom of 2 young children?**

It is busy and stressful at times, but coming home from work to my kids provides the perfect balance for me. I am really thankful for the flexibility in the job I have. Since graduating, my employers have embraced me and my kids and have been understanding with childcare issues.

> **What advice do you have for new working moms?**

When I first went back to work after my son was born, I felt so bad that he was spending nine hours a day at daycare. I started to think that if I was away from him that much, he would be more attached to



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his teachers at daycare than me. But this was never true; the bond we have is much stronger than that. So I would say, don't feel any guilt about working and daycare. Just focus on making the time you have with your kids special. Don't be too stressed about household chores. If the laundry needs to be done and your kid wants to play, play!

> **What do you find the most meaningful in your work?**

Part of the reason I went to law school was my previous work with a refugee resettlement agency. Working there sparked my interest in working with immigrants because I loved hearing their life stories and helping them get their lives established here in the US. I try to provide some hope for the future for clients who have had such traumatic pasts. Also, I have found that many low-income clients end up involved in the legal system, but have no real context of what is going on. I find it meaningful to be able to explain the law to them and to help them understand what is going on when they feel like they are being shuffled around through the legal system without any choice in the matter.

> **What do members of the bar who do not practice asylum law need to know about asylum law?**

The media can sometimes make it seem that the majority of asylum seekers are falsely claiming asylum to stay in the US as long as possible. That is not true. There is a backlog, sometimes up to seven years. Many of those impacted by the delays want nothing more than to have their claims heard so they can move on with their lives. The administration of the process is imperfect and unnecessary delays are endemic. Before this work, I didn't know the extent of these delays. I think it is important for people to understand the extent of the backlog. More generally, I think it is important for all attorneys to remember that everyone has a unique story to tell and to not place clients into stereotypes before getting to know them.

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