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## Rudenstine Fellow Abigail Finkelman Defends NYC's Children



*Cardozo's 2019 Rudenstine Fellow, Abigail Finkelman, '19, at Commencement in May 2019.*

*Cardozo's David Rudenstine Postgraduate Fellowship provides funding for one student from each year's graduating class to pursue work in the public sector for one year. The Fellowship term generally begins the fall after graduation. Made possible by a generous endowment from Susan Halpern, the Fellowship gives recent graduates support to launch a career in public service.*

Surrounded by plush stuffed animals resting on the windowsill and children's drawings adorning the walls, Cardozo's 2019 Rudenstine fellow, Abigail Finkelman, looks right at home. Finkelman is spending her fellowship year at the Children's Law Center, representing children in court and researching New York's pilot program for civil court alternative dispute resolution initiatives.

While Finkelman has always worked in the public interest arena, she initially did not see herself as a litigator. That is, until she participated in Cardozo's Mainzer Family Defense Clinic at Bronx Defenders during her 2L year. "I signed up because I liked kids – I always had an interest in women's and children's issues. A significant portion of their clients are women, and the work obviously relates to children," she shared. "I very quickly fell in love with it. I wasn't expecting to love doing direct services work, but I did!"

After passing the bar, Finkelman's newfound passion for direct services and family defense led her to reach out to the Children's Law Center to collaborate on a post-graduate fellowship application for Cardozo's Rudenstine Fellowship. Finkelman told Cardozo's Center for Public Service, "[In college], I majored for three years in early childhood special education. Before law school, the only other career path I ever seriously considered was teaching. Being a lawyer for children obviously had a lot of appeal."

While Finkelman was searching for her post-graduate job, the Children's Law Center did not have any job postings for entry-level attorneys. However, the Rudenstine fellowship allowed her to pursue an opportunity not otherwise available. Finkelman approached the Children's Law Center, and she asked them, "What's a project you'd like someone to work on for a year?" They were thrilled to have the opportunity to bring her on board to lead their work involving New York civil courts' upcoming mediation initiatives. "I'm going to figure out how [alternative dispute resolution] can best involve our clients. Turns out there is not much of a model for it, because most states don't give children the same right to counsel that NY does," she said

In legal disputes where children are often the center of the court case, Finkelman believes they are often the least listened to: "They should clearly be the most important voice in the room, and they are often not."

Her co-workers and supervisors at the Children's Law Center have guided her through litigation on behalf of these overlooked children. "My supervisor was also a Cardozo alum and really taught me all the things I didn't know. She was patient with the fact that I was terrified to stand up in court – couldn't remember how to spell my name, [but] she kept putting me up there," Finkelman reminisced fondly. Even if Finkelman decides to shift her career path once the fellowship ends, the

experience she has received in the courtroom is going to be a “huge asset” no matter where she ends up.

She urged other post-graduate students to consider the Rudenstine fellowship, as it can open career doors otherwise sealed shut. Finkelman said, “Many times, if you didn’t do the right internships, you’re going to have a difficult time getting a job in the field. [The fellowship] let me do something that I wouldn’t otherwise have been able to do. There were not any openings, but funding coming from somewhere else [allowed me to do this work]. It also let me do something I didn’t have experience with.”

*article written by Molly Meisels, YU '20.*