

Q&A: Rewarding Pro Bono Work, Substantial Litigation Experience Mark Summer Program

News

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Three former Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell summer law clerks—Gillian Burnham, Angelica Perez, and Audrey Pham—spent a significant amount of time this past summer on a pro bono case that's currently in the news. They concluded their summer by attending a hearing for the case in Texas, where WTO and other firms sought a preliminary injunction requiring Texas prisons be kept at safe temperatures below 85 degrees. *Read about a win we had in the case this week [here](#), and find more background on the case [here](#).*

Gillian, Angelica, and Audrey reflect on the experience.

What were your roles on the case?

Angelica: I drafted a research memo that summarized about 80 cases with 8th Amendment claims—cruel and unusual punishment allegations—related to prison conditions. It was very interesting to analyze the similarities and differences among cases.

Gillian: I drafted direct examination outlines for witnesses. A few of my questions made it to the hearing, which was exciting. The research on the correlation between outside temperatures and times of death was particularly interesting.

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As the research progressed, the story of what happened started to unfold.

Audrey: I dug through medical literature to research the dangerous and fatal effects of heat and write a research memo. It all came full circle when some of my research was used during the hearing.

What were the most profound moments of the hearing in Texas?

Gillian: It was inspiring to see the compassion that lawyers had for their clients who have been affected by the heat in prisons. These lawyers were able to create a platform that exposed horrific events impacting their clients. And they did so by weaving together facts and emotion, which was fascinating.

Audrey: The experience will help me stay grounded—it was excruciating to watch prisoners speak first-hand about what they lived through and witnessed. It is easy to lose sight of the privilege that comes with being a lawyer. It also was fulfilling to see the difference lawyers can make when they pour their skills and passions into pro bono work.

Angelica: You could hear a pin drop when Marci Simmons, a key witness who was incarcerated for 10 years, detailed how the heat affected her. The hearing made me understand the power of storytelling in legal advocacy.

How did you end up attending the hearing?

Angelica: I made a comment in passing that it would be cool to attend the hearing in Austin and truly see the culmination of our work. I didn't really think WTO would fly out three summers. And then one week later we found out we had approval to go. What an unexpected surprise!

What sets the WTO summer program apart?

Audrey: I don't know of many summers that went on a work trip. WTO really involves summers in client work, and that is a unique advantage.

WTO lawyers really trust the summers. They trust our work and then incorporate our work into the final product and embrace opportunities for us to see the results of our work. All this instills confidence in us and shows we are valued and respected. Our experience at WTO helped create a strong start to our careers.

Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell lawyers have taken more than 1,100 trials and arbitrations to verdict or award and 300 appeals to opinion all across the nation, with exceptional results for our clients.

Established in 1998, WTO today numbers more than 110 trial lawyers and litigators. The firm represents sophisticated clients in high-stakes civil trials, appeals, and related litigation ranging from complex commercial to class actions to catastrophic torts.