

My Internship at the Boone County Prosecutor's Office

Capstone Project: Anish Ganga Capstone Project

Reading *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson during my sophomore year sparked a newfound interest in the criminal justice system. It broke through my black-and-white view of justice, revealing its true complexity. Wanting to further my knowledge, I secured an internship at the Boone County prosecution department through a meeting arranged by my debate coach, Dr. Johnson. Under the guidance of Assistant Prosecutor Fumi Owoso and Attorney Risa Perkins, I spent 4 months delving into the reality of criminal justice.

At first, I learned the ropes of the legal world. This looked like sitting in on trials and hearings while reading police reports and summaries from old cases to get a feel for how court documents were organized while also refining my legal thinking. Instead of thinking of what someone did, I thought about what I could prove. It required a stronger level of criticism but also a level of detachment I wasn't ready for. When you read a case, you can't just go by the gut feeling of what someone did despite it looking "so clear." It taught me how justice is a double-edged sword. High burdens of proof can save innocent people from punishment, just like they can for the guilty. But interning at the prosecution department also pushed me to reevaluate what being found guilty meant. Too often, we reduce those who have committed crimes to criminals. But as Bryan Stevenson said, "Each person is more than the worst thing they've ever done." When I read jail emails (communications between inmates and others), I saw a lot more than what meets the eye in daily news reports. I saw tense family relations, signs of declining mental health, and so much more that only being on-site helped me understand.

As a high school student, I didn't have the proper qualifications to go further than simply assist with current cases. This made me feel tired of going through body cam footage and seemingly "boring" tasks. However, I learned it was these kinds of things that allowed the attorneys to pursue cases. During a case regarding firearms, I examined several body cam videos that lasted hours to find any time bullets were collected. It seemed so boring at first but it helped another attorney have a breakthrough because I was able to find the necessary evidence without having to compromise their already heavy caseload. While feeling limited was a difficult experience, the purpose of this class is to learn and because of it, I find myself even more eager for a future in justice.

While interning at the Boone County prosecution office has definitely made my views of justice more nuanced, it's shown me, even more, how gray justice truly is. No one is just their crime because there is so much of a story that's untold. Something I couldn't just see through the pages of *Just Mercy* but through my internship and I hope to be able to see even more in the future.