

# At the forefront, from the civil rights era to Guantanamo Bay

By Michael Adams

The Centre for Constitutional Rights has always been on the cutting edge of human rights and public interest litigation practice in the United States. For a firm of just forty souls, the accomplishments of this non-profit far outweigh its small size. Founded by radical leftist lawyers William Kunstler and Arthur Kinoy during the civil rights era, CCR has more recently been involved with litigation on behalf of aspiring black fire-fighters discriminated against by the precincts they apply to, detained prisoners allegedly tortured in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, and innocent Iraqis alleged to have been wantonly murdered by private military corporations contracted to the United States government. Specifically, CCR has been involved with litigating on behalf of Iraqis murdered and maimed by Blackwater in Nisoor Square, as well as current cases involving Iraqis tortured in Abu Ghraib (*Saleh v Titan*) and a Canadian citizen rendered by the United States government to Syria, where he was tortured (*Arar v Ashcroft*).

It was the latter two cases to which I was assigned upon my arrival. I was responsible for researching, formatting and organising the petitions and appendices that were to be submitted to the Supreme Court of the United States. However, working under three lawyers in the International Human Rights Litigation docket means that you diversify your work broadly. At any time, an



Michael Adams at the US Supreme Court

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intern might be called upon to perform a variety of research tasks – from doing research into newspaper coverage on a certain topic, to compiling a memorandum on the application of a common law principle in a particular court. The learning curve was incredibly steep – I was told I had a couple of days to build a working knowledge of US federal civil procedure, as well as state tort law – but more than rewarding, as I was able to appreciate the depth of the issues at play in the courts. Indeed, CCR is unique amongst human rights non-profits for the sheer number of cases it brings to the courts through its own initiative.

The consequence of CCR's small size, combined with its busy docket, is that every intern plays a vital part in developing the petitions that eventually make it to the federal courts. There is no room for error, nor is there for excuses. This also means late nights! It is not unusual for the lawyers to work 24 hours a day and sleep at

the office, and if you care about the work and the result, this means you stay too of your own volition, although you will never be told to stay. However, the nature of the firm means that this workload is never a chore. Indeed, working around the clock is one of my finest memories of my time here – it was an honour to collaborate with such accomplished, passionate lawyers (the late night pizza was an extra incentive).

What captures your imagination and your passion at CCR is the outrage directed against egregious acts of injustice that boils beneath the demeanour of everyone working here. What captures your loyalty is the gentle, kind spirit of the lawyers and their willingness to struggle in the face of insurmountable odds. Working here was a pleasure and an honour and I look forward to maintaining my relationship with an organisation truly at the forefront of human rights protection.