

# Internship at the Centre for Constitutional Rights, New York

By Katharine Brown

When you arrive in New York, it smacks you right in the face: the lights, skyscrapers, noise ... it's wonderful. Travelling across the bridge to Brooklyn, there's a completely different vibe. It's much less hectic and every street is an eclectic blend of different cultures, generations and tastes.

Living in Crown Heights and working in Manhattan, I felt like I had the best of both worlds. I arrived in New York at the end of November, just managing to catch the end of fall, and the transition into winter when bright leaves and snow cover the streets.

Going to the Centre for Constitutional Rights (CCR) everyday was an absolute highlight. By way of background, CCR is a non-profit organisation that uses strategic litigation and public advocacy to defend and promote human rights. It was founded by constitutional lawyers in the civil rights movement and has stayed very true to those roots. It represents progressive movements and sees its role as empowering communities via human rights law.

For a staff of just over 50, CCR has an astonishing workload. In the time I was at CCR, attorneys were working on a large number of cases spanning different areas of law and jurisdictions. Over the years, its work has had a profound impact on the trajectory of American civil rights law. CCR has often been ahead of its times, arguing points of law that go on to become precedents, and weave their way into the everyday lives of Americans. Continuing with this theme, much of the work CCR does these days is focused on international accountability, both in corporate and state spheres. For example, CCR has been instrumental in pushing the boundaries of universal jurisdiction and demanding accountability for crimes committed by American corporations abroad.

In my time at CCR I was placed with the international human rights team, mostly working on matters in US law, international criminal law and international human rights law. I did legal research and drafted letters, attended meetings, reviewed freedom of information documents and had the chance to attend a court hearing. One particular highlight was spending a week at the UN, at the general session of the Committee on NGOs. I attended on behalf of CCR for their application for consultative status. It was an incredible opportunity to see the workings of the UN in practice.

The public events hosted by CCR also stand out as highlights. Having the chance to learn



Katherine (middle), with fellow Castan Centre Global Intern Emily Fischer (left) and Emily's sister Brigitte (right), ice skating in NYC on Christmas Day.

about public advocacy work as well as law was a welcome surprise. The events included the premier of *Waiting for Fahd*, a film made by CCR, a Gitmo advocacy event that was combined with an art show, and two 'First Wednesdays' – a casual monthly event where members of the community come to discuss CCR's work with the staff.

As much as the big cases and events though, I'm equally as grateful for how wonderful the everyday was at CCR. I shared a big office (the Ella Baker room) with a number of other interns, where we started every morning with coffee and chats about the news. Being in the Ella Baker room gave us lots of opportunities to learn about each other's work, and to reflect on issues that came up. Being right near Greenwich Village, the lunch options were amazing, and I also got to spend many lunch times amongst the shelves at the NYU bookstore.

Both personally and professionally I gained so much from the experience. Although I was sure I wanted to work on social justice issues beforehand, being at CCR gave me a much clearer picture of where I want to fit. It deepened my understanding of human rights law and movement lawyering, and also left me with incredible memories.

Thank you so much to the Castan Centre and donors for making these internships possible. And for anyone thinking about applying this year, do it!

**Information about the 2016 Global internship program can be found on our [website](#).**



Three questions for:  
New Castan Centre  
Associate

Deborah  
Whitehall

***If money was no object, what would you do all day?***

I quite like what I do now, but would gladly wish for longer days for more day-dreaming and lingering with my favourite people.

***If you could go back in time, what year or period would you travel to?***

So many possibilities, I'm not quite sure! Paris in the 1920s (think *Midnight in Paris*), or nineteenth century Bellingham (think *Oscar and Lucinda*), or just wishing my last Saturday night back so I could go to the cinema!

***If you could bring one human rights issue to the attention of the Australian public what would it be?***

Every day I remind myself that human rights are about living together in this chaotic, diverse world. Remembering, as a daily practise, about looking out for each other and developing a compassionate response to community must be the answer for so many of our troubles. Although I seldom go to church, I found Tim Winton's Palm Sunday compelling in his recounting of the biblical question, 'If a child asks you for bread, will you give him a stone?'. Asking 'awkward questions' like this is part of what it means, for me, to live a world that is responsive to human beings and human rights.